Proud Mortal Office Worker Way

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Proud Mortal Office Worker Way

by nomnom_writes

Summary

Luo Binghe is crawling out of the Endless Abyss, ready to take revenge. Unfortunately, he slips on a rock and dies. He wakes up, transmigrated in the office of a random light novel publishing house, as the new hire. A strange System appears in his mind, and tells him that he's got an objective: save the life of Shen Yuan, who looks infuriatingly like his shizun, and not get fired in the process.

Notes

This fic has been brough to life thanks to my beta reader eel (@spottedgardeneelstan on tumblr), and the artists horo (@horobinota on bluesky, whose work you'll be able to find in chapter 12) and bingdelulu (@dehloosquared on twitter, whose works you'll be able to find in chapters 11 and 14!)

Chapter 1: Stallion

“Shen Qingqiu…”

Luo Binghe’s body has never felt better. Power coursing through his veins, revenge invigorating his every bone. A perfect picture of the broody, vengeful protagonist.

Xin Mo in hand, he finally crawls out of the hell he’s been stuck in for four long years. The culmination of betrayal, loss, and hatred melds in his mind. From it rises a blazing phoenix. A promise to raze his former home to the ground.

“...You fucking bastard!”

Merely a few steps, and he’ll leave the Endless Abyss once and for all. His plan will take shape. He savors the thought of all the unspeakable things he’ll do to Shen Qingqiu when he gets his hands on him.

Until: a traitorous rock. A pebble, really. A comma out of place, from an oh-so-careless writer, rushing to get the chapter in time to make the website’s tight deadline. Thus, Luo Binghe’s feet, blessed by his newly awakened powers, falter. His momentum is too great, and he falls hard on the jagged rocks of the Endless Abyss.

In the unforeseen final moments that come before he’s had time to process his fall, he sees his former shizun first, followed by more than a fair share of feminine faces. Finally, a jade Guanyin. Then, at last, darkness.

[THE SYSTEM WELCOMES YOU.]

“What?” is the only thing Luo Binghe can spit at the loud, booming voice in his mind, forgetting all his signature theatrics and edginess.

He reaches backward in his mind, trying to see if Meng Mo is playing some sort of insane trick on him. What he finds is worse. Not only does he not feel anything, but the act of reaching itself now feels foreign to him. No, utterly impossible.

[Please stand by. Loading: a story not foretold.]

Luo Binghe’s eyes were used to many things. Gentle moonlight creeping between the shed’s wooden beams. The harsh sun in his eyes as he trained. The cold fire in his shizun’s eyes as he exacted his punishments. The crimson darkness of the Endless Abyss.

What they’re not used to is violent, blue, flickering office lights. As he opens his eyes, they assault his senses, before any small talk or corporate nicety can. Before buzzing computers or the violent clacking of keyboards, the wretched lights are the first act of violence that the Zhanwei Fu Publishing Company office enacts on him. He squints, baffled by this blinding light and the strange thing that occupies his field of vision. A strange, light blue page that seems to be stuck to his eyelids, unmoving as he sways his head. A single line of text reads:

[Loading complete. Commencing trope #01: Meet Cute.]

Explain this nonsensical jargon. At once. You do not want to meet my wrath at such a moment.

You can take the stallion out of the shitty novel, but alas, you can't take the shitty novel out of the stallion.

[Be advised that you should refrain from speaking out loud when communicating with the System. Other people can hear you, whereas the System only needs to hear your thoughts to communicate.]

"Luo Xiansheng? Are you unwell? Who are you speaking to?" Another foreign voice speaks.

[OBJECTIVE: LOADING.]

"Speak plainly, creature! What is it that you want?!" Luo Binghe snarls at the entity that's summoning pages into his mind. He doesn't care about the puny humans around him, who don't emit even a single ounce of murderous intent.

[Please await your instructions.]

"Instructions?! How dare you!" Luo Binghe spits at the strange little man in front of him.

"Guys, are we sure he's alright? What's he talking about?"

"Maybe the new environment is stressing him out, you know?"

The last comment comes from a short, curly-haired man who's standing a few meters away, rightfully worried about the possibility of the new hire going insane in just a few short seconds. His voice is, ironically, incredibly shaky.

[Please wait. Instructions loading. ERROR: in medias res.]

Luo Binghe, of course, does not await instructions. His palm shoots out towards the man, but that empty feeling resurfaces. No palm blast reverberates through the room.

"What's he doing?"

"I don't know. Luo Binghe, are you alright?"

Very well. Luo Binghe might have been knocked down, but some things always work. His fist makes contact with the man's jaw, sending teeth flying.

[ERROR.]

A man rises from his chair, not far from where the commotion is happening.

"What do you think you're doing raising your hand against another employee?! The disrespect of the youth of today, when they've just been offered a job! You're fired!"

[ERROR. ENDGAME REACHED. ERROR. MISSION FAILED.]

Luo Binghe feels his spirit getting yanked backward and then thrust again into his body. The violent light assaults his eyes once more.

“Luo Binghe? Hello? Are you alright?”

“...What?”

[Loading instructions: 100%]

[We apologize for the inconvenience.]

[As an apology for our lack of speed, you shall only be penalized by a fine of 300 OP.]

[Unlocked: three lives. One life lost.]

[OBJECTIVE: Save the life of Shen Yuan. INSTRUCTIONS: do not get fired from your job at Zhanwei Fu Publishing Company. Should you be terminated from your job, your experience would be reset, spending one life point. You have three life points remaining.]

Shen Yuan?!

Thankfully, speaking in his own mind without alerting others is still coming naturally to him.

[Shen Yuan is your colleague. Shen Yuan only has one life.]

And if I just walk out of here?!

[Answer loading. . .]

[Answer: death.]

Rage bubbles in his gut at the audacity of this lowly creature who won’t even show its face.

When will this Shen Yuan die? If I complete this absurd task, will I be able to go back to my life?

[Answer: You do not have the necessary OP to unlock this answer.]

What?!

[Definition: OP. An abbreviation that stands for Overtime Points. You will get such currency by helping Shen Yuan decrease his stress levels and increase his health levels.]

So my life revolves around this Shen Yuan, huh?! Where’s the fucker?

[Locating Shen Yuan. 20 OP used. He is currently located in the room to your left. The system advises-]

“Shut it!”

Luo Binghe runs into the small room, where people are gathered around a small sculpture, gaining an offering of dark liquid. A man turns around. His hair is like straw. His cheeks are sunken and tired. His posture is… horrifying. And yet in his eyes, Luo Binghe can see it, clear as the daylight. *Shen Qingqiu.* Short, choppy hair morphs into long, dark locks. He's suddenly smaller, somehow looking up at this man who is a few inches shorter than him, pleading eyes, asking to spare him from punishment, *just this once*.

Shizun…? How…?

[WARNING: SHEN YUAN IS NOT SHEN QINGQIU. WARNING.]

With glee, Luo Binghe realizes that even if someone shackles his mind, his one vow is unbreaking even in another life. He'll kill the man who ruined everything in his life. He doesn't care *how* or *why* his shizun is in front of him. He lunges at him, toppling both of them on the sculpture. His hands are on the other man's throat, instinctively.

"You…!"

[WARNING: DO NOT HARM TARGET.]

"I DO NOT CARE! DIE!" He snarls. The black liquid, which Luo Binghe's mind just barely registers as coffee, pools underneath him. A poor replacement for the man's blood.

[WARNING: 300 OP HAVE BEEN DEDUCTED AS A FINE FOR HURTING THE PARTICIPANT'S TARGET.]

"What is the new hire doing!? Someone call security and get him off the poor man!"

[WARNING: SHEN YUAN ONLY HAS ONE LIFE.]

"You're fired!" The boss-type who fired him before takes a step in the room. He pinches the bridge of his nose and looks back to the room. "Shang Qinghua, are you not even able to hire a sane person? Get the resumes back out of the trashcan."

[Phew.]

[Ehm.]

[Restarting scenario trope #01: Meet Cute.]

[Life points: 1.]

[Engaging story mode: nightmare difficulty. Permadeath module initiated.]

Chapter 2: Desk heist

Chapter Summary

> Luo Binghe awakes again, two lives down. Can he manage to not get fired for a third time?

The realization that this is indeed a *real* hell comes when he opens his eyes to find himself in the same spot he was mere moments earlier. The strange little man is speaking softly as if nothing has happened.

“Luo Xiansheng? Are you alright? You look quite pale.”

Despite the situation, Luo Binghe still has the awareness of a stallion protagonist. He reins in his emotions in a split second, his mind racing to find the best course of action. His eyes close, and he looks inward, clearing his mind for communication.

Foul spirit. What is your name?

[Correction: I am not a spirit. I am the System.]

What is your purpose in dominating my mind, System?

[User Luo Binghe died upon leaving the Endless Abyss. He has been given a new chance at life. The System is his supervision and his rules.]

So that fleeting memory of a rock smashing his skull was not a product of his imagination.

And if I were to regain my power and return to my original body?

[Luo Binghe’s original body is dead. Returning to it would mean death for the current soul as well.]

A most displeasing answer. But no matter. Luo Binghe is not one to trust this System, which has imprisoned him and taken him away from himself. Besides, the creature’s words imply that Luo Binghe is currently inhabiting a body that is not his own, therefore meaning that upon regaining his power and finding a suitable portal, he could possess someone else’s body. Cultivating martial arts in another body from scratch will consume time and effort, and yet it will be done because it must. Choosing a suitable candidate might help as well, he thinks. Perhaps that demon, Mobei-jun, whose abilities would prove incredibly useful in their own right.

Luo Binghe’s mind spins with calculations, reaching to recall what he knows about the barriers between the Demon and Human realms. How to breach them, how to cross them. A

similar approach to the techniques used by Demons in his world will, hopefully, apply to his situation. Shen Qingqiu would never have allowed him to study such demonic techniques, but Luo Binghe's ears were always stretched out for information, even in the Endless Abyss. He can only hope that the hazy memories will slowly reveal themselves to him. But in the meantime, he pinches the bridge of his nose and opens his eyes to the dreadfully bright, gray interior. He scans around, studying the people and their mannerisms, the way their smiles are unnaturally stretched as they look towards him from their small tables. He considers mimicking one of those expressions, but they lack warmth. They do not appear trustworthy. And he *will* need allies in this war. He's deceived tougher foes than these puny little humans without a trace of internal energy between the whole lot of them.

"Do excuse me, Xiongdi. I am alright, I thank you for your concern." He bows gracefully in front of the people around him. "I am called Luo Binghe. I put myself in your esteemed care."

The people around him look mildly uncomfortable. A reaction to his specific words, or a common response? He will have to investigate if he is to blend into this lot. Even the little Shen pokes his head out from the adjacent room. His gaze on Luo Binghe is much more piercing than the others, and it does not go unnoticed.

The man at his side quickly pats his shoulder, motioning for him to rise from his bow. "Luo Xiansheng, there is no need to be so formal! Follow me, I'll show you to your desk!"

Luo Binghe allows himself to be corralled like cattle by this little human. Keeping the fake, warm smile plastered on his face, he spares a glance at the one whom he is meant to protect.

Foul spirit. Are there any other souls who have transmigrated into this hellish construction?

[Affirmative. Luo Binghe shares his journey with another soul.]

As I expected. My former tormentor's soul haunts my second life, then.

[Negative.]

Excuse me?

[Shen Qingqiu's soul is not present.]

Foul spirit, do not play me for a fool. You clearly stated that another soul made the same journey I did. This Shen Yuan shares a name, structure, and visage with the bastard Shen Qingqiu.

[Clarification, second issue. Shen Yuan's body is currently inhabited by Shen Yuan's soul.]

So he has no ties with my former teacher?

[Perhaps in another life. But in front of you stands simply Shen Yuan.]

Perhaps in another life? What is that supposed to mean? Do not toy with me, foul spirit! If the soul who shares my journey is not in Shen Qingqiu, then who is it? Answer me at once!

“So this is your desk!” The petulant little voice cuts through Luo Binghe’s conversation. It seems like, as he focuses, the conversations he has with the creature inside his mind happen much quicker than they would if he spoke the words out loud. He cannot slow down time to a near stop just yet, unfortunately.

“This humble one thanks his Xiongdi.” He sputters the words before he’s actually had a chance to look at the ‘desk’, or else he would have surely held them back. On Cang Qiong mountain, even a hated little wretch like Luo Binghe, treated no better than a dog, had the chance to read and study in the library at times, when not locked in his shed. There, his image of a ‘desk’ clearly became a sturdy, gorgeous, and intricate wooden table, with drawers, hidden compartments, and delicate vases full of rich ink, everything framed by proper natural light coming from multiple moon gates. Even when not allowed inside the library, he would explore the mountain and find suitable, quiet places in which to practice his martial arts and study the scrolls given to him. At the time, he had felt envy towards his martial brothers as they studied sitting on plush pillows, whilst Luo Binghe sat in the grass of a random clearing, his back resting on a tree, disturbed only by the gentle sounds of the leaves, or by the distant noises of training from his martial brothers. Yet even those quiet moments in the woods around the mountain now seem like stolen from the Heavens themselves. What he finds in front of him is, instead, a sorry little piece of gray metal, lacking the warmth or elegance of wood. It bears clear markings of dirt and dust long uncleaned, almost purposefully left there as a gift to Luo Binghe. To mark his misfortune, his designated place is set up in a damp corner, away from any natural light source. They must truly hate him or have clear ways to haze the newcomers. He can’t say he blames them.

“You’ve got quite the desk! Close to the break room and in a quieter corner of the office, it’s so big as well! You’re lucky, Xiansheng!”

“Eh?”

“Eh?”

“This is not… your desk to punish those who underperform on their tasks?”

“Huh?! No, it’s the desk of the guy who just left, we didn’t switch anyone around, Xiansheng!”

Luo Binghe only then remembers to school his expression into a warm smile. “Then I apologize for my hasty assumptions, Xiongdi. I’ll get situated right away.” He bows once more, cupping his hands in front of him.

“Again, no need to be so formal. Just come find me at my desk after you’ve set up your work WeChat account, so we can give you your first tasks.”

“Thank you, Xiongdi.”

He looks over at his space. Whatever his new sect brother just spoke of will have to wait until his space is cleaned until it’s fit to be worked on. Yet his eyes immediately fall on the empty desk beside his. A thin wall separates the two spaces, but he can see that it, too, appears vacant.

His gaze goes over the people, an identical absent look in all of their eyes as they stare right in front of them, each in their small little box. These people look more like cattle than humans. Even Shen Yuan, in the exact opposite corner from Luo Binghe. He can spot that short jet-black hair all the way from here. Those thin, round, silver glasses, gently sitting atop his straight nose, hiding piercing green eyes, clear as ice and clean as jade, that he had recognized Shen Qingqiu in. His features are sharp, just like his shizun's, yet they're slightly covered up by a plumper physique, which gives a soft roundness that looks entirely alien on that face. But Shen Yuan will await his turn.

Just as Luo Binghe swiftly moves one space to the right, he notices his Xiongdi, back with another man. He'll have to get used to this body, this newfound lack of instincts that don't allow him to perceive any slight change in the rooms he's in.

"Everyone! Sorry for distracting you again, but please welcome yet another recruit, *although I don't remember asking for two, Shang Qinghua*. His name is Mobei-xiansheng. *Seriously, what is up with these names?*"

Luo Binghe feels his legs giving from underneath him for the second time today. As he looks at the man, much taller and broader than he is, not an ounce of confusion or daze on his chiseled features, annoyance boils in the pits of his stomach.

Mobei-jun. Is that the other soul you spoke of?

[Affirmative.]

Mobei-jun. As in, the Demon King in the northern boundary of the Demon Realm. That *Mobei-jun?*

[Affirmative.]

Has he retained his powers? Or is he in the same position, with the same prospects as me?

[User Mobei-jun is subjected to the same rules as user Luo Binghe, both beginning with 400 Overtime Points. They only differ in their core mission. Mobei-jun has another target he is tasked with keeping alive.]

Who?

[Shang Qinghua.]

How am I supposed to know who that is?!

[Locating Shang Qinghua. 20 OP used. He is currently located in the cubicle next to Shen Yuan's.]

And there he is. A little man, with a chestnut little nest in place of his hair, looks entirely frazzled as he stares at the newcomer. Perhaps he does not like changes in his clan. New members are bound to shake their normalcy up, and many resist such changes. Perhaps Mobei-jun's struggle will be much harder than his own.

“Ah, Xiansheng, please move your things back to the desk in the corner. This will be Mobei Xiansheng’s new desk. I’d swap you, but I’ve already sent the new seating chart to HR and even such a small change would be a pain. You understand, don’t you?”

He shoots a glare at Mobei-jun. He’ll have a slightly bigger desk, with much better light to boot. Perhaps Mobei-jun himself arranged it so, to show him right away that he intends to fulfill his mission no matter what, and he’ll trample on everything Luo Binghe has to get there. That piercing gaze. It even looks like he’s retained some of his martial prowess, no matter what the creature says. Truly, despic—

“If A-Luo likes this desk, then we will switch at the first opportunity that presents itself.” Mobei-jun bows gracefully.

“Eh?”

“Uh? You two know each other?”

Before Luo Binghe can think up a convincing lie, Mobei-jun’s got him covered. “We come from the same village in the countryside, yet we had not heard from each other in years after moving away. Meeting here today was a coincidence for the both of us, albeit a welcome one. I trust that we’ll help each other get acclimated to the company.”

“How moving! Then I’ll let you two get situated, and—”

“Yes, thank you. I’ll find you as soon as I’ve fully completed the setup on our new devices.”

The company sibling looks entirely too smitten at Mobei-jun’s confidence. He’s basically beaming as he walks back to his desk, muttering something about how *there are still competent recruits out there that make their seniors’ lives easier.* Only Luo Binghe notices the visible strain in Mobei-jun’s jaw. He’s heard rumors of the demon, how he’s not used to lying, charming, deceiving, or rather, talking altogether.

Mobei-jun’s already got his hands inside the weird satchel that was already in both their hands upon waking up in this nightmare. He moves to take out the contraptions with entirely too much confidence for someone who, by all rights, should be just as confused as Luo Binghe is.

“How are you already speaking with such ease? The words these people speak are foreign to us.” Luo Binghe leans closer to whisper, hoping that the little story about childhood friends will cover up for this sudden closeness.

“I asked the System. It used up some points to give me the knowledge necessary for the tasks required by this job, along with a general structure of the Zhanwei Fu Publishing Company.”

“You could do that!?”

Mobei-jun simply shrugs.

Foul creature.

[...]

Tsk, he can't believe it would be so petty as to show a blank message with three dots.

System.

[Ready for inquiries.]

Give me the same stuff you gave him.

[Error: insufficient points.]

What!? Explain yourself, now!

[User Luo Binghe's current OP: 60. Points needed for action: 200.]

I swear, I'll find out where your physical form resides, and I will rip it to shreds—

[The System recommends a deep breath.]

Fuck you! How did he manage to get all the information?!

[Both users started with 700 OP. User Luo Binghe lost 300 OP when he punched an innocent. User Luo Binghe lost 300 OP when he strangled Shen Yuan. User Luo Binghe used 20 OP to locate Shen Yuan. Luo Binghe used 20 OP to locate Shang Qinghua.]

He doesn't know if he should laugh or cry. As he speaks to this entity, Mobei-jun presses a few buttons and pulls a few levers, thus illuminating the small, lit-up portal in front of his face. How is Luo Binghe *so* behind this man?! He just got out of the Abyss, he was supposed to get his revenge, beat this demon, and rule the world, but the universe is laughing in his face! Shen Qingqiu's scum face, as he dropped him in the Abyss itself, keeps flashing in front of his face, lighting up the black portal only for his eyes.

And how do I get points?

The System chirps. It clearly appreciated receiving a competent question, for once. [The user may earn points by, A. Helping Shen Yuan in any way that might increase his overall health; B. Perform tasks outstandingly for Zhanwei Fu Publishing Company; C. Fulfill your purpose.]

Huh? What's that last thing?

[Error: unknown variable.]

He'll have to investigate further on that point, but he knows that right now, his mission is to get those damned points. The sooner he gets back to one hundred, the sooner he can understand how this wretched world works, and thus get even more points. Wait…

What can I even do with OP points?

[Correction: your wording of "OP points" is incorrect and redundant. The participant is thus saying "Overtime Points points." It is like saying "chai tea." The System trusts that the Participant will agree that saying "tea tea" is entirely stupid."

Huh?

[Nevermind. Users can exchange OP for information, whether freely available or not; money in your credit card, items, and other prizes.]

What are the other prizes? I specifically asked to know all of my options!

[...]

Oh, this fucking creature is going to die. Soon.

[The System can still communicate and peer into the user's thoughts without the user's consent. The System would like to inform user Luo Binghe that it cannot die.]

"Well then, I can still find some creative ways to make you suffer." He whispers.

"Yes. It is unnerving." Mobei-jun's chilling voice startles Luo Binghe almost out of his seat.

"Ah… yes. I suppose so," he stammers. He's heard of this demon's ruthlessness. So why is he so damned focused on the little portal in front of him, instead of slaughtering every single one of these jianghu humans? He leans closer, peeking out from their shared wall and into the taller man's much cleaner space. Peering does nothing. The man's hand moves, resting on a little stone upon his desk. He hits it and things change on the portal.

"I have exhausted all my points, thus I cannot immediately unlock the feature of sending some to you through the Overtime Point Exchange Pro—"

Were you ever going to fucking tell me anything? Did he get a nicer creature in his head?!

[Systems operate with the same rules but are different programs that respond to their users' attitudes and use AI technology to train themselves using their user as the main module.]

Luo Binghe might now know most of the words written in front of him, but he knows when someone is calling him a bitch when he hears a backhanded sentence like that. Meanwhile, Mobei-jun continues, "But I will do so as soon as I reach the necessary points."

"Why? Why is the demon of the North helping his rival?"

"Not rivals. Our… tasked individuals spend time together at the office, and influence one another. Helping one helps both." He pauses, brows knitting for just a moment as if speaking so many words at once is a gargantuan effort. "Plus, Luo Binghe would have beaten me, were we alive in our previous lives."

"What?" He blurts out before he can hold it back. Damn it all. This world is sucking the confidence out of him without even realizing it. He puffs out his chest, still careful to

whisper. “I mean— of course! My might and power would have crushed even the strongest of demons.”

“Mh. I felt it. Power. Shifting. For a few seconds, before everything went black.”

For a few seconds. Luo Binghe clears his throat. He wishes not to talk of how his demise was met. He’s suddenly overcome with a wave of longing. If he hadn’t slipped, would he have beaten everyone in front of him, until he reached the peak and became a new kind of king? Is that the destiny that was planned for him? The purpose that was stolen from him? All the time he spent training, struggling, was it worthless? He could have just let himself die the moment he fell into the Abyss, not even bothering to crawl out. Would he have ended up in this wretched place anyway?

He can faintly see his reflection in the dark portal in front of him. They’re both just as empty and hollow. Without his powers, this fleshy body of his only feels like a cage. This is not what his life, his *fate* is supposed to be. No. No. This is all that *bastard* Shen Qingqiu’s fault. He, who made him tumble into the Abyss, and thus kicked off the events that eventually made him stumble to his death as he crawled out. At each and every turn of Luo Binghe’s life, that scum is always following, always casting a curse on him. He knows his purpose: it can’t be anything else, if not slaughtering that man. Tearing him limb from limb, hearing those lips scream, and finally *beg* for mercy.

He’s lost in his fantasies, and his shizun’s voice rings out.

“Are you having trouble? That guy was always tinkering with his PC, I wouldn’t be surprised if he actually broke it. Let me see.”

Chapter 3: Liege

Chapter Summary

Luo Binghe learns how jobs work in the modern world (tragic).

In his previous life, he would have felt such a man coming closer from a hundred meters away, not to mention the speed of his reflexes in reacting. Now, he's forced to sit in this uncomfortable contraption of a chair and *let* this man, who someone *snuck up* on him, do whatever he pleases. Mobei-jun's icy glare reflected in his, *what did this creature call it? PC?* and into his eyes.

Shen Yuan is stiff. It is clear from a cursory glance. His movements resemble a frozen, clumsy giant, as he effortlessly turns the machine on. The light from the portal assaults his eyes. It is decidedly *unnatural*. He may not truly have his instincts anymore, but he can still feel the presence of some monster or unholy relic. This is it.

Yet Shen Yuan effortlessly dominates the beast. Gripping the pommel attached to a weird string, he gets different things to move on the portal.

"Mh, is the brightness bothering you? I'll lower it." Shen Yuan commands the beast to shine not as brightly. Luo Binghe hates that he's already got to be grateful to the man. Not that he'd admit it.

"Your mastery is commendable. But I could have resolved the issue by myself."

Shen Yuan freezes. The System comes to life.

[Shen Yuan's stress levels increased by 2 points]

Huh???

Luo Binghe grits his teeth. This System seems intent on stripping him of everything, including his very predisposition. Still, if he's got a chance at escaping, he's got to play the game. He leans back, clearing his throat.

"But I was not familiar with the specific commands. Thank you."

[Shen Yuan's stress levels decreased by 1 point.]

Why did it not get back to what it was before?!

[The System merely communicates the happenings of Shen Yuan's psyche.]

I will rip out whatever throat lies beyond these earthly manifestations.

[The System would like to inform user Luo Binghe that it does not possess a throat.]

Shen Yuan, meanwhile, is none the wiser. He's grumbling something about the previous colleague not properly "wiping" the "computer". If there's anything pleasant about him, other than his immediate subservient actions to help Luo Binghe, it would be all the ways in which this man is strikingly different from Shen Qingqiu. This man's hair is short and not nearly as luscious. His posture leaves much to be desired. And, whereas his shizun always carried a distinct scent of freshly cut leaves wafting around him, this man smelled like sea lavender and coffee grounds. His skin is more flakey and weak, with an astounding pallor that no doubt comes from being locked in this cage for most of the day. The most striking difference, still, is this man's utter *weakness*, both emotional (as given by his sudden fluctuation from a simple comment by Luo Binghe) and physical. The man is *frail*. Useless and weak. Shen Qingqiu was always so utterly poised, always looked like he could send a sharp leaf flying towards your throat should one anger him. It is a disappointing, albeit slightly comforting difference between the two men. One that makes Luo Binghe desperately want to bully him without consequences. Physical ones, at the very least. Yet, if he strains the man's psyche too long…

"Did the man who brought you in brief you on your duties? Both of you?"

Luo Binghe snaps his head up to look at the scrawny man. Mobei-jun simply ignores him instead, not even sparing a glance.

"No. He did not."

"Tch." Shen Yuan pinches the bridge of his nose. His eyes scrunch up and little lines form around his eyes and nose. Luo Binghe's never seen those around Shen Qingqiu's eyes. "They never bother. As if it's so below them to train new employees. Here, you have to…"

Shen Yuan goes on and on about what Luo Binghe must now do. The "*computer screen*" flashes with blank pages full of little rows, letters written in indescribably perfect calligraphy, and colorful little floating images. Some even resemble nature, although overlaid with a strange script that he does not recognize.

"To recap. Go to these websites where amateurs publish their web novels. Check the ones with high view counts, and high like-to-view ratios. Read the first few chapters. Check if they don't already have a contract somewhere, and put them in the spreadsheet. Someone higher up will filter your document and pick out a few candidates for publishing. If you were hired, casting aside the option for egregious nepotism, it must mean that you know your stuff about these works. Use your judgment. Sometimes a diamond in the rough will have very few views. You can put it in your spreadsheet as well if it's good enough."

Literature. That's what his tasks will focus on. Perhaps he'll scour useful martial art tomes and recover his cultivation, in time! His Shizun had never let him get close to the real useful stuff, but with this incredible contraption, nothing would be outside his bounds!

He turns to Shen Yuan, studying the man's eyes, those pools of clear, perfect jade. What would be the best approach for this strange creature? He decides to appear like a competent new sect member, for now. Someone to guide, but that won't cause trouble for the people showing him around.

"Thank you. Without your guidance, I would not have known where to turn. I will remember these instructions and abide by them."

Shen Yuan, surprisingly, does not seem impressed. But, at the very least, the System is not blaring in front of Luo Binghe's eyes that he's made the man stressed.

"You are… quite welcome." Shen Yuan mutters, unconvinced. "Do not come to me if you have any further questions. I'm simply the one they always call when there's something wrong with computers. I came over here to save someone the time and effort to look for my desk when you inevitably found yourself face to face with your predecessor's account." Without leaving any room for Luo Binghe to work his charm, he turns on his heels and walks back to his desk.

Not in your target audience area. Would that mean they'd have difficulties interacting? How is Luo Binghe meant to save this man from his fate if he cannot get close enough to properly talk to him?

Still, if he's to survive, he'll have to work. Shen Yuan will certainly not pass away if he figures out what his work will ask of him for a single day. Right?

System. What are Shen Yuan's current stress and health levels?

[Premium Information. 400 OP are required.]

Nonsensical. How am I to help him if I cannot gauge how far he is from his breaking point? That, you can tell me, at the very least? How many points stand between him and his doom?

[The System cannot freely give such information, as it loosely falls under the "Premium Information" category.]

Loosely? Can you tell me a range, then?

[Answer: this System cannot.]

Lies! You bring me forth into this world to participate in your wretched competition that only you are allowed to know the rules of!

The System's window only shows three dots.

Lies!

[...]

Treachery!

[...]

You must have a purpose in bringing me here. Do not think you can fool me. It must take considerable power to transmigrate me from my world to this one, sucking away all my power, not to mention resuscitating me. And you certainly do not speak like a powerful creature. You speak like a servant who writes down names at martial arts competitions. So who is this Shen Yuan, truly? Why must his life be saved at such a high cost, above all others? There is no reason why you would want me to fail at such a task. Were the three limits arbitrary, put by you or your maker to ensure that I take the task seriously? Or would your power be utterly depleted once you restart my current life for the third time? Every possible answer points to you needing me to fulfill this artificial purpose. If you do not want me to fail, if you do not want me to test the limits of this cage, then you will give me the information I require, at once! Or are you too much of a coward, you—

[Shen Yuan is currently 200 to 500 points in both stress and health away from his doom.]

Will he instantly die as soon as one of those hits the limit? Or does he have to be utterly broken in both?

[The System has already unjustly rewarded user Luo Binghe. For further information, please gather 400 OP. The System advises against spending time frivolously chatting in one's own mind.]

Tsk. Still, he got more than he could have reasonably asked for. Thus, he turns back to his computer. He's picked up the basic uses of the items in front of him by watching Shen Yuan and Mobei-jun. He presses on the mouse which does not look like a mouse at all, and proceeds to look through the first book. The numbers do not matter as of now. He looks at the text, expecting the type of knowledge that would have been acquired in this world where portals and other wonders exist.

When I told Sayaki-chan that I liked her, I wouldn't have expected my life to be turned upside down so soon! Here's the story of how a regular high-school kid turned into the God of Death by dying, being born again, and dying again, all after finding out his crush was a blood-sucking lich!

Huh?

He takes a deep breath, focusing on his missing meridians, just like he would if he were to meditate. Not all hope is lost. He should not have expected to find a tome of wisdom on his first try. Even rich libraries have their sections of common literature. The elders said they helped understand what the commoners were enjoying, in moderation.

After struggling for several minutes to go back to the page where he previously was, he opens the second story.

My name is Jack McSayu. I am half Japanese, half Chinese, and half American.

Luo Binghe's luck is not better for the rest of the day. Was his karma in his previous life really *that* horrible? Every few hours, his work gets interrupted by the System, regularly

pinging him when Shen Yuan's parameters drop or rise. The man is of a fickle constitution, for those warnings are not few. Still, as Luo Binghe keeps track in a corner of his mind, the man does seem to be slowly deteriorating.

Ten minutes before they're set to leave, he transports the strange string of words that make up the "address" of the horrible stories he read, choosing the ones that might appeal most to those without brains. It will have to do for his first day of work. He sends the file over to the person Shen Yuan indicated earlier, using "Us Chat." Or whatever it's called.

Leaving the office at the end of the day proves to be an unnerving experience. His feet seem to move before he's even had the chance to think. They lead him down the tall office building, and into the street. There, Mobei-jun, who had been following close by to keep an eye on him, apparently reassured that Luo Binghe seemed to know what he was doing, simply nodded and walked in the opposite direction. The walk to someplace that instinctually feels right is enlightening. Not only because it proves that someone either inhabited this body before him, or someone *made* it with some necessary information ingrained in it, but also because it allows him to observe this work. Much can be learned about this society by simply walking through the masses. Roads, buildings, signs, stores, wares. Luo Binghe's brain works overtime to catch everything in its power, sometimes even stopping in front of display windows to study the tools of this age. Merely an incense time later, his feet carry him into a decrepit building, and up four flights of stairs, into the left side corridor, and in front of a run-down blue door. The feeling of alien knowledge in his mind is… invading, to say the least. Instinctively, he *knows* to find his apartment's keys in the small zipped pocket in his bag, even when he's not sure what an *apartment* is.

As he walks inside, he finds that the place is… inadequate. To say the least. The space that would normally be deemed fit for a single use, has instead been chopped up into small areas that hold energy captive, without letting it flow freely. A kitchen, a bathroom, a bedroom, and a small communal area. Luo Binghe assumes that the many doors he passed by on his way here must hold similar areas. He'll have to talk to the administrator about efficiently distributing space. Why ever would all of these units need a kitchen, if they can simply convert a couple on the ground floor to a communal one? Surely, it would be much more practical. For now, he figures he'll have to get used to all the ways in which this world refuses logic.

The bathroom holds what he seeks the most. A mirror. He braces himself for a myriad of sights. The wretched creature who sends messages in his vision does not seem like the sort that would grant him a handsome body.

Instead, opening his eyes, he finds a sight he can *almost* recognize. A messy mane of charcoal black hair, starry dark eyes, and more or less the same bone structure. The only stark difference is on his forehead. His Zuiyin is nowhere to be found. Even rubbing it with water, nothing pops out.

It… feels wrong. Yet, as something stirs inside him, almost liberating. He is without his mark of sin. Most wise men would look at this and tell him that he's been given a second chance at life. *Truly* wise men would know that no matter what sits on his forehead, Luo Binghe will not waver in his conviction. His soul was thrust on the path of sin, and he intends to walk it

until it leads him back to the one who started it all. Until he can bathe in the blood of Shen Qingqiu, so red and all-encompassing that it covers his Zuiyin.

That night, in a shitty bed that no cultivator would ever think of sleeping on, Luo Binghe dreams of a life with the long-haired man as his general. He dreams of the life that slipped between his fingers like sand. It is not a restful night.

Chapter 4: Performance Review

Chapter Summary

After an unexpected promotion from his new boss, Mobei-jun, Luo Binghe starts studying Shen Yuan's habits.

The following day appears to go by normally. Luo Binghe keeps his distance from Shen Yuan, prioritizing grasping the rules of this world for his survival, for now. His favorite part is *definitely* the break room. His colleagues who gather there require a break, both from their duties and from their own minds. Thus, they are susceptible to whoever simply tells them what they need to hear. What, in Luo Binghe's world, would have been complimenting a subpar swordsmanship form, or stance, translates quite easily into sharing the sorrow of the "boss" (whoever that is, for Luo Binghe has never met such a monster), and complimenting choice of food (in taste or health, depending on the person and their disposition). Through such flattering, he's already managed to find out important information that his victims give freely for the service of a kind, dashing smile.

Zhanwei Fu Publishing Company is slowly declining, as competitors pass them in sales. Hiring Luo Binghe and Mobei-jun was a last-ditch effort to *freshen up*.

Shen Yuan is generally seen as a weird loner who never socializes with his peers.

The person to the left of Shen Yuan, Shang Qinghua, Mobei-jun's target, is seen as a hyper-talkative, awkward nerd. Women usually scatter whenever he enters the room.

Never, ever get ginseng coffee from the left coffee machine. For some reason, it opens up the little tea compartment and makes a horrible mixture of the two.

The second point is the most worrying. If this man is a loner, it could either mean that he's desperate to welcome some attention, or that he utterly despises it. The latter of those options could spell doom for Luo Binghe.

On the second day, right after getting into work, there's a flashing WeChat notification waiting for him. Coming from the account he recognizes as belonging to some lower-level boss, it says, in overly enthusiastic tones, that Luo Binghe's publishing recommendation has been picked up and the announcement on social media already doubled the publishing company's "follower count." Luo Binghe does not understand how he managed to bring in new disciples with his actions, and where the company will put them since they're out of desks. He does understand this:

[Side mission completed: temporarily save Zhanwei Fu Publishing Company from obscurity through a fortuitous license!]

[700 OP have been gained.]

Seven hundred?

[...]

Luo Binghe can't help but outwardly smirk. He'd thought it would be much, much harder to gain back the points he lost.

Oi. All that fuss about points, and they rain down in just a few days?

[User Luo Binghe stumbled upon a rare achievement by accident. Be advised that at your current progression in the story, such rewards are akin to lightning in a clear sky.]

For a single fraction of a second, he considers giving some points back to Mobei-jun, as thanks for his earlier transfer. Yet, the man is working at an almost alarming speed. Those fingers never stop clacking away at the keyboard. Luo Binghe figures he's better off keeping those points.

On the third day, the desk to Luo Binghe's right is empty. Given that Mobei-jun is *always* at his desk before Luo Binghe gets to work, and after he packs up for the day, so much so that he's started to wonder if the man even goes home to sleep. Such a sight is troubling.

He whips his head around. Shang Qinghua is not there. But the man has a penchant for tardiness. Instead, Luo Binghe locks eyes with his deskmate. The man looks somewhat worse for wear. The bags underneath his eyes are horribly dark.

System. How much will locating Mobei-jun cost?

[Answer: locating key people costs 20 OP. As user Luo Binghe already knows.]

The man is competent. It is not worth it to waste points so early.

"Does asking if he's alive cost anything?"

[Answer: it does not.]

Luo Binghe wants to strangle someone for the crime of this machine not just answering the real question.

Is Mobei-jun alive?

[Answer: yes]

Then Mobei-jun's charge must also be alive. Luo Binghe boots up his computer. And just then, the door to one of the private offices opens. The former demon stands there, shaking the hand of some boss. His eyes are icy, his clothes sharper than they were just yesterday.

Huh?!

A notification pops on his screen. A WeChat web message from Mobei-jun himself to their company group chat. The one with the whole department in it. It reads:

“Current structure changes. Effective immediately. Myself as Licensing Department Manager. Shang Qinghua as secretary to myself. Luo Binghe as supervisor for Shen Yuan.”

How is he a manager already?! No, that doesn’t even matter right now! The airhead! To send such an open communication to the whole office is to effectively broadcast their secret missions! Everyone will notice such weird and sudden changes! He turns to the two ladies who work opposite him.

“He’s already in a manager position! So quick, no?” The short lady on the left, the one with a bob, whispers while fixing all the little vertical photos of young men that she’s scattered on her desk, around little knick knacks that all read “EDG” or “EXO.”

[Shen Yuan’s stress levels: 50 point increase.]

“Yes, certainly, but he’s so *assertive*. Such confidence will be good for the company, especially in this state.” The taller one with long hair whispers back. Neither of them seems really keen on not being heard. Luo Binghe knows they see him watching them out of the corner of their eyes. She’s rearranging some small little creatures on her desk. Some little crying creatures, a couple of bunny-bears with big smiles, and a baby with a huge head. She continues, “Plus, I heard he was working at, like, triple the speed of a regular employee.”

They both turn towards Luo Binghe.

In truth, he’s never been privy to conversations between women. There were so few in his sect, that they rarely interacted, if at all. These two look like two conspiratorial, adult women. They do not remind him of his wide-eyed shijie. Perhaps it is for the best, to not remember her while he’s so far away. He clears his throat. “Yes. His speed is unnatural. Just yesterday, I caught him texting upper management to suggest a change in the company’s structure, to streamline editing and translation.”

The two women look at one another and gasp. “See! So confident!” “Such decisiveness. That’s probably why the bosses promoted him so quickly, especially if they think he can get us out of this financial hole.”

Luo Binghe is about to join in once more when a bag is dropped on the desk formerly belonging to Mobei-jun.

Shen Yuan who, unbeknownst to Luo Binghe, would normally love some gossip, is currently enraged by having been demoted. So far down as to have a *new hire* becoming his *supervisor*.

“Supervisor. Has he even told you what my work is about, before assigning such a task to you? Merely three days ago, *I* was explaining *your* work to you.”

Luo Binghe sits back down, giving the man his full attention. He’s ignored the slow and steady decline of his charge’s health these past few days, but a sharp fifty-point increase is not something to be ignored. He puts on a soft and charming smile.

“I assure you, I am as confused as you are. Perhaps it could be because of my fruitful advice for the light novel section? I’m told it did numbers on social media. Still, I do not presume to know how to do your work. I can merely give some advice. Perhaps we could help each other. I’m sure we’ll find some way to make one another’s workflow much smoother.”

[Shen Yuan’s stress levels decreased by 1 point.]

And so a simple smile does not work on the man. *Tsk*.

“I doubt that two people looking at one another’s work on top of their usual duties would make anything *quicker*. But such is the hand we’re dealt with by management. We can only obey.”

[Shen Yuan’s stress levels decreased by 5 points.]

Huh? Did Shen Yuan’s points go up from just *talking?* That man truly is fickle. Not that he minds. He simply needs to keep him talking.

“I will do my best. Please instruct me on your work. I simply know that you work in editing.”

Shen Yuan pauses for a moment. His gaze falters on Luo Binghe’s innocent doe eyes. “Y-yes. Let me set up my computer.”

For a moment, as Shen Yuan is turning away from him, Luo Binghe thinks he’s fucked it up again. And then,

[Shen Yuan’s stress levels decreased by 150 points.]

Luo Binghe almost wants to give up on understanding this man right then and there.

System. What just happened? How many points to figure out how I just made him lose that many stress points?

[High-level psychological analysis requested. 200 OP required.]

Forget it.

Shen Yuan starts speaking once more: “Indeed, I edit the light novels you send over to our team. More accurately, I have to have intense WeChat conversations with amateur authors who have never read a manual of style or brushed up on their primary school grammar textbooks, but believe they’re above criticism because they’ve got 200k clicks.” He rolls his eyes. The resemblance to Shen Qingqiu is uncanny in such a moment, as he criticizes and nags. Yet, as he directs his annoyance to something so trivial, Luo Binghe can’t help but think it feels… different.

“Mhm. I only put the first novel in the doc because it had an immense amount of views. The writing itself was… utterly atrocious.”

Shen Yuan *chuckles*. The system pings another fifty-point gain, as the man replies. “Then you already have a knack for the job. This company doesn’t take literary masterpieces. We need

to make money. With highly clickable slop that makes for great cheap paperbacks." He opens up different windows and points to the screen. "Here. My correspondence. In the other window, you can see the file as it is being edited. I place requests for editing which can be either approved or rejected by the author. I can only assume that, as my supervisor, you'll be looking over my statistics. How many edits I can actually convince the authors to go through with, and such. I'll send you my overall performance review by HR from last year. Those are the things the company is usually looking for."

With another ping, the file appears on Luo Binghe's screen. He nods. "I understand. They paint the dragon, you dot the eyes. But they do not let you dot the eyes at times."

There's a pause, which must be a second at most, but feels like the time it takes an incense stick to burn in Luo Binghe's mind. The silence is broken by Shen Yuan's wary voice. "Uuuh… sure?"

The rest of the day passes by quietly, but Shen Yuan's stress levels do not decrease.

Chapter 5: Forced Proximity

Chapter Summary

Luo Binghe studies Shen Yuan. Closely. He does not like him.

[Commencing trope #02: Forced Proximity.]

It is much easier to study Shen Yuan's habits when his desk is right next to Luo Binghe's. He's figured out a series of quirks of the man's, which he now keeps annotated in a little window that he somehow managed to convince the System to open (by intimidating it, of course). *"You wouldn't want me to write this stuff down, for Shen Yuan to see it, and for this whole mission to be compromised, would you?"* The System soon relented. Thus, an ever-growing window simply titled "Shen Yuan" reads:

[1. Shen Yuan hates his job at Zhanwei Fu Publishing Company (as many do).]

[2. Shen Yuan seems to loathe light novels, and thus his stress levels constantly increase as he works.]

[3. Shen Yuan knows very much about his work and seems to be extremely competent at editing novels. That does not extend to him speaking to authors.]

[4. Shen Yuan's big, round glasses frame his face in a very weird way. They almost hide the angular shapes of his face. They make him look very different from Shen Qingqiu.]

[5. Shen Yuan's shirts are expensive but worn out around the edges. He's rotating between three of them.]

[6. Unlike most of my colleagues, who have accessories, little pictures, and *stuff* all around them, Shen Yuan does not. Maybe he does not have *hobbies* (definition: an activity done regularly in one's leisure time for pleasure; a small horse or pony). Other colleagues say that a *work-life balance* is important, as it is also important to put work and our community first. Further research to be done.]

[7. Shen Yuan's posture is horrible. He seems to not realize it.]

[8. DO NOT CALL USE THE WORD NITPICKING AROUND HIM. DO NOT INSINUATE THAT HE IS PEDANTIC.]

[9. Shen Yuan's body is pathetically weak. He huffs after three flights of stairs. Shen Qingqiu would hate him. And would hate to see a mirror image of himself so weak. I do not know if it simply makes me glad, or if it makes me *slightly* pity Shen Yuan. I am still not on his side.]

The list, by now, almost fully covers half of Luo Binghe's field of view. This mission won't be easy. But Luo Binghe's been on his best behavior. He never calls Shen Yuan's corrections "nitpicky." On the contrary, he firmly agrees with his assessments of the novels. Even gently pokes his arm to call him for help on choosing some titles. Shen Yuan is wary at first. His icy glare does test Luo Binghe's perfect facade, at times. On the other hand, Shen Yuan does not know that he is courting death at all times.

But his walls slowly crumble. Especially when, thanks to Luo Binghe's suggestions on how to word corrections, the authors start being nicer to him. Shen Yuan starts looking at him with both envy and a somewhat softer look. That's when Luo Binghe knows he can strike. His perfect plan to fix the man's health is set in motion.

During their lunch break (which Shen Yuan never actually takes, in favor of working) Luo Binghe takes out an exquisite metal bowl full of dried mugwort leaves and sets it on his desk. He pinches a dull sage green leaf and places it over his left brow. With a flick of a sleeve, a Hello Kitty lighter appears in his hand, and the flame caresses the leaf. Soft wisps of smoke rise and touch the low ceiling of the office. Shen Yuan's wide, disbelieving eyes fall on him.

"What are you doing?!"

Luo Binghe smirks. He caught the bait. With this *perfect* plan, he'll teach Shen Yuan all about meditation and medicine and the way qi flows through the body.

"Oh, *this* is a concoction of dried mugwort leaves. Burning it and gently setting it upon one's Seven Orifices—"

"Excuse me?!"

[Shen Yuan's stress levels increased by 50 points.]

Luo Binghe stops in his tracks. He's never seen a *fifty-point* increase.

"Have I done something wrong, Shen-laoshi?"

"You start *burning stuff* in the office and talk about *orifices* and you have the gall to ask if you've done something wrong?! Yes! Put that out immediately before someone sees you and blames *me*!"

Luo Binghe immediately obliges, leaning down and whispering as if to hide from some mysterious onlookers. "I'm sorry, senior. The Seven Orifices are also called the Seven Apertures. They refer to one's eyes, ears, nostrils, and mouth. Like the Six Bowels, you know?"

Shen Yuan's eyes bulge wide. He shakes his head. "*Has he been raised in one of those weird religious freak cults I keep seeing flyers for? I never thought they'd have regular jobs."* Would flash over his head if this were an office romance manhua. Unfortunately, Luo Binghe does not yet possess enough points for such a feature. Instead, he mistakes Shen Yuan's expression for a bewildered curiosity and instead focuses on the *other* part of his words.

[Shen Yuan's stress levels decreased by 10 points.]

Luo Binghe sighs. At least his explanation helped, somehow. "Senior, why would you think that others would blame you?"

[Shen Yuan's stress levels increased by 50 points.]

Fuck.

Shen Yuan turns around. The tips of his ears turn red. His index digs its fingernails into his thumb's side. Luo Binghe's eyes immediately move to the monitor on his left, so that he may see at least a fraction of Shen Yuan's expression in it. His mouth opens. Then closes. He is unsure.

System. Tell me how to make him speak. Now.

[Cost: 100 Points.]

It was an order. Tell me.

[Shen Yuan feels like user Luo Binghe has him all figured out and feels uncomfortably naked under his gaze. Suggestion loading…]

Speed up or you will regret it!

[Suggestion loading…]

[Suggestion loading…]

[Suggestion: pushing through the conversation or physical touch, in the current Relationship Status, will make Shen Yuan more uncomfortable. The System recommends retreating and changing the subject.]

All of this takes some time to describe, but it actually happened in an instant. Thus, not even a second after speaking those words, Luo Binghe leans back in his chair and boots his computer up once more. "I apologize for my naivete. This is my first job out of University. I might not understand the real dynamics of office life…"

Shen Yuan sighs. "Yes, you wouldn't understand. You're the office's darling. You wouldn't even have to do anything for others to immediately assume that the smoke was caused by me, and to start defending you."

Well, of course, you foolish man. This is what Luo Binghe would like to say, with a roll of his eyes. Can this man really still be hung up on the way people use each other as stepstools in their path? Shen Qingqiu really would be disappointed by him.

"Then I will own up to my own mistake."

[Shen Yuan's stress levels decreased by 20 points.]

Thus, Luo Binghe adds a line to his little list.

[10. Shen Yuan feels resentful of the way others can be treated better than he is. Charisma, attractiveness, etc.]

In the end, as the short and long-haired women in front of them get back to their seats, they sniff around, and their eyes immediately find Luo Binghe. Instead of reproach, they smile.

“How wonderful! Did you burn some incense? I’ve always said the office needed some diffusers or something, especially as the day goes on and people, you know…” The short-haired lady winks at him.

Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. His stomach rumbles. He ignores it.

Chapter 6: Courting Gifts

Chapter Summary

> Luo Binghe tries his best to get in Shen Yuan's good graces the only way he knows how: through food.

[Commencing trope #03: Omegaverse dynamics: Courting Gifts.]

[Error: remove “Omegaverse dynamics”.]

Even during his wretched time in the shed, Luo Binghe had managed to eat close to two times a day. Be it food from his shijie or his own scavenging, his stomach had a few morsels at key times.

Shen Yuan, on the other hand, is a different story. Luo Binghe has never witnessed him either bringing or buying lunch in the overpriced cafeteria a few stories down from their office (he loathes that his knowledge packet came with his salary, and thus the active consciousness of rationing his money to get a morsel of good meat). He figures *that* must be the reason why Shen Yuan refuses to take lunch. An act of protest against their low wages. Assuming Shen Yuan even makes the same amount of money as him. Still, the man only drinks from the communal coffee pot, and only if everyone else has already cleared out of the break room. Luo Binghe has spotted him staring hungrily at trays of cupcakes and free noodle samples that sometimes appear out of nowhere in the break room. Even locking eyes with him and nudging the tray towards Shen Yuan doesn’t manage to get the man to get up and finally *take* something for himself. Luo Binghe would really like to tell him that this is exactly why he's seen with such weariness around the office: Shen Yuan does not even participate in those rituals actively designed to give people an excuse to talk about one another about any meaningless things that are not their work. Such as which broth type goes better with chicken. Luo Binghe almost retched in his mouth after tasting the concoction from those awfully colorful cups. Mobei-jun looked on in disgust from the safety of the glass walls of his office.

Thus, he decides on the day's mission: ask Shen Yuan about his lunch. He strides into the office at 8 AM sharp, after another slightly restless night. He dreamed of leaves cutting his skin and crawling under his epidermis until there was nothing left of his own body but a shell of grass. Only a marginally better outcome for him than office life. He passes by Mobei-jun's office, where the man is standing right behind his secretary. He's got his hand wrapped around the back of the man's neck. The short, slightly curly-haired man is shaking tremendously and nodding, eyes wide.

Luo Binghe wonders how this tactic will be effective in dealing with the patient's stress levels. Not that it's *his* business.

He stands in front of Shen Yuan, who is already sitting down at his desk, one hand over the small of his own back as if supporting it from some ache.

“Do you have your lunch with you today, senior?”

“Mh?” Shen Yuan looks at him with a raised eyebrow, as if he loathes having been interrupted from the *most* important moment of his day: checking his phone while his computer takes exactly two minutes to boot up. Luo Binghe does not know what he's looking at, so intently, every single day. He makes a note about it on point 11, with an addendum to ask the System about it sometime soon. “I don’t.”

“Do you buy your lunch in the cafeteria? Or one of the spots on the block?”

“I don't.”

“Why?”

[Shen Yuan's stress levels increased by 30.]

So he *is* looking at something he deems as extremely important, each day, at 9 AM sharp. Good to know.

“I have no appetite around noon.”

“That is because you are not used to eating around noon. Akin to a snake biting its own tail. If you start taking up the habit, slowly, it won't feel so unnatural.”

Shen Yuan *really* feels like strangling this weird guy who was clearly raised in some sort of Shen Yun natural healing energies cult. “I'd rather not. It saves me money and time. Less groceries, less time buying, planning, preparing, and eating meals. My body does fine with my current lifestyle.”

Luo Binghe uses all his strength to keep a “not for long” from slipping through his lips. Thus, he has no strength left to keep his eyebrow from raising and his eyes from wandering to Shen Yuan's hand, still caressing his own lower back. Shen Yuan is, unsurprisingly, unamused.

“I have a hard time understanding why such private matters of my own health concern you so personally, Luo Binghe.”

There it is. The biting tone of his shizun. Luo Binghe has to close his eyes for a moment (he would, of course, deny that this is a way of cowering from his fears, and is instead an act to protect Shen Yuan from his rage), his hand instinctively reaching from Xin Mo, which he has replaced with a very weirdly placed expensive fountain pen, stolen from Mobei-jun's lavish office. He forces a smile as he opens his eyes, but that smile is akin to a demon's, even in the eyes of someone from modern times.

“I am not one to forget favors and violate justice. You were of great help to me when I was just starting out on my journey. Our new manager tasked me with being your supervisor. Health directly impacts your ability to work. I do not believe that skipping lunch to work raises your efficiency levels, as they are only marginally better than those of our colleagues

who regularly take long lunches, bathroom breaks, some breaks, coffee breaks, and chatting breaks."

Shen Yuan opens his mouth. Luo Binghe does not let him speak. *Heavens, does that feel good*.

"You will not have to spend more. Be it time, energy, or money. I'll make extras of my own lunches. Starting with small, light portions. If you like my cooking, I'll make new things for you every day."

In front of such an undeniably good deal with absolutely zero downsides, even Shen Yuan, in his infinite grumpiness, cannot refuse. Luo Binghe even notices a small blush on the tips of Shen Yuan's ears towards the end of his proposal.

"Then, I thank you. But do not expect me to eat it all. Or fall to your knees like all our other colleagues."

Luo Binghe smirks, for his battle is already won.

From the following day onwards, Luo Binghe brings homemade lunches to Shen Yuan. He is completely oblivious to the way his colleagues are starting to send slightly longer glances his way.

He starts with light broth with noodles. He slowly moves up to vegetables, and most importantly meat, to get some fucking nutrients in the man's body.

Each day, Shen Yuan's health and stress levels decrease, by slowly rising increments.

Chapter 7: Misunderstanding

Chapter Summary

> Luo Binghe is stupid and suggests dual cultivation with females of the species to Shen Yuan.

[Commencing trope #04: Misunderstandings.]

Luo Binghe would have been stupid not to notice the analytical gazes that Shen Yuan sends their female colleagues when he thinks no one can see him. Ineptitude with romance, or rather with women in general, seems to be an evergreen plague on men of every time and place. That, Luo Binghe knows. He also figures that having a female figure to help ease Shen Yuan's stress in *physical* ways would do wonders for his mission. He'd reap the benefits without doing any of the work.

So, as they eat their homemade bento on their shitty building's rooftop (a recent measure that Luo Binghe somehow managed Shen Yuan to take, citing a need for sunlight and air that is only marginally better than the stagnating one of the office, Luo Binghe takes a leap.

“Do you have a partner, senior?”

“Mh? I have you.”

Luo Binghe is about to choke on his spit. *You don't have me, wretched creature.* “No, I meant, a female partner.”

Shen Yuan freezes. Then laughs. “Don't you know how this world works? I'm a poor salary man, with no charisma or good looks. No woman would want to touch me with a ten-meter pole. My only pick would be the bottom of the barrel. Even then, it would be too much work.”

“No woman would want to touch you with a ten-meter pole? Yet how do you know? You don't even try approaching them. The long-haired senior who now sits in front of you, I've seen you throw glances at her. She likes to take her coffee break at 4 PM every day. You could be there right before her and strike up a conversation.”

“How did you even notice such a thing?”

Luo Binghe freezes. He's said too much. Sure he's about to be found out, he opens the little fund window on the System, ready for emergency countermeasures. Yet, Shen Yuan simply continues speaking. It seems that such creepy behaviors from men are not at all unusual in this world.

“No matter. I was only looking at her because she *does* seem too pretty to be single. I've overheard her moaning about it to her friend. It seems that even the top-tier contenders on the market struggle, and not just the leftovers like me. She'd be much more on the level with you, you know. You're both young and seem to like caring for your appearance a great deal. Both she and her friend are very at ease when talking to you, they even spill their top-tier office secrets, something I never thought a *guy* would be able to pry off their mouths.”

Since when did this turn into a conversation about setting me up?!?!

“Senior-”

“Think about it, your offspring would have incredibly luscious hair-”

“You're thinking about offspring already?!” Luo Binghe is ready to rise from his seat and smack the man with his cheap chopsticks.

Only then does Shen Yuan stop. “Alright, alright. I'm just thinking of the best match. But it still doesn't explain why you would care about setting *me* up.”

“It's only natural, senior. Having a partner highly increases quality of life and offers benefits that no other type of relationship can. It's only natural to always be striving to look for a partnership.”

“I see…”

Luo Binghe doesn't let him finish. “Men and women have fundamentally different energies. Yin and Yang. They are opposites, but they are also deeply complementary. If you were in a relationship, you could use daily sex to exchange and strengthen your diminishing vital energies.”

[Shen Yuan's stress levels increased by 70.]

“Indecent!”

Now, *that's* a big number. It immediately alarms Luo Binghe. Shen Yuan is red in the face and refuses to look him in the eye. His hand… his hand is trembling as it grips his knee.

“To speak so openly about another’s sex life while implying that I’m some sort of inept virgin! This is the stuff HR—”

The ground gives out from under Luo Binghe’s feet, not unlike when he stumbled as he left the Abyss. Red warning signs blare in his vision, almost entirely overshadowing Shen Yuan’s frame.

[ATTENTION.]

[ATTENTION.]

[WARNING: HR MEETING WILL END IN TERMINATION.]

[PROCEED WITH CARE.]

[WARNING.]

It hurts his eyes and forces him to close them, but the warnings don't disappear. He stumbles forward, grabbing at Shen Yuan's sleeve and tugging it. It's the only thing anchoring him to this current lifetime. In his mind, the warning becomes the jagged rock of the cliff he was thrown off. A pit opens in his stomach and he feels just like then, hands reaching and trying to grasp at this same insufferable man to save his life.

Back then, he knew his cultivation was strong enough to break the fall. He was fueled by hatred and ready to fight. When he died, later, his brain hadn't even processed the fall before everything shut down. *This* is the first time Luo Binghe gets that sinking feeling in his chest that tells him he's *afraid to die.*

"Please." The word has never sounded more sincere coming out of his mouth. "Please. I spoke out of turn sh— senior. I wanted to suggest health tips. I— foolishly, I didn't consider the personal nature of the matter, as I have been similarly advised in the past by my peers."

His breath is shaky and he's never felt so pathetic. His palms are sweating. In his previous life, his body would not have allowed such a thing, which would have meant losing grip on his sword. This treacherous, useless body, with a nightmarish host inside it, however, does allow it. He can barely manage to open his eyes and squint at Shen Yuan, but cannot possibly decipher the man's microexpressions.

"Please." He continues pleading at the man's prolonged silence. He tugs at the man's sleeve again. "I cannot lose this job."

Shen Yuan finally turns around and stutters. "I— I never intended to report you. Please, calm yourself. I was simply… taken aback. You're my junior and this is clearly your first job, so I'll go easy on you. But you should really know the basics of office etiquette, jeez." He sighs. "And for the record, I was just saying *this is the stuff HR would go crazy for*. Because they're just weird like that."

Shen Yuan *does* feel bad. Not only is this guy young, but he was also clearly raised by weirdos in a closed-off environment. Maybe this job is his way to gain financial independence and run away from those freaks. For the first time, he doesn't look like the dashing new hire who's effortlessly popular with everyone and already got a promotion. He looks like a little kid, begging for forgiveness and tugging at his mother's dress. His hand itches to pat the little rascal's head.

Meanwhile, Luo Binghe's vision finally clears. His eyes are open and now he *really* looks like a wide-eyed doe. A timid smile stretches across his lips. "I— I misunderstood your comment, then, senior. I'll try my best to look up more stuff about *etiquit*."

Shen Yuan chuckles. "Etiquette. It's French."

Luo Binghe nods. His smile gets bigger as he regains control of his spirits. "My senior is truly knowledgeable."

Shen Yuan doesn't know whether to laugh or cry. *This is basic stuff! Don't compliment my intelligence on such trivial things!* Still, he now realizes can't be too harsh on this young man who knows close to nothing about society. He looks at Luo Binghe's eyes, ready to half-scold him again, and is struck by how *earnestly* they're looking at him. He's bare, as this little doe basically puts his life in his hands, and he's completely awestruck. Shen Yuan's heart skips a beat at those reddened cheeks and parted lips.

[Shen Yuan's romance points increased by 1.]

[1000 OP gained.]

Huh?!

[Subgenre unlocked: Office romance!]

Huh?!?!?!?!

Chapter 8: Commute

Chapter Summary

Luo Binghe fights the public transport system.

It takes a surprisingly long amount of time for Luo Binghe to realize that his shitty apartment being a five-minute walk from the office is an *extreme* fringe case in the office.

The realization comes the first time he notices Shen Yuan talking to the short-haired woman who sits in front of them. It happens just a couple of days after their little incident about dual cultivation, after which Luo Binghe decides to forget all about the romance stuff. He doubts that the System would have anything useful to say about it, and he's decided to hoard his points for now.

Shen Yuan is leaning above the cubicle wall, while the short-haired woman lounges in her chair.

"Yeah, I take the S-line as well, but from the other direction. I had to get up at 5 AM today, can you believe that?"

"Mhm." Shen Yuan nods. "It's a nightmare to get on during rush hour. I hear they're planning on renovating the S-line this summer, while most commuters are away on vacation or taking time off."

"Eh?! Summertime? I won't survive living a morning person life until summer!" She whines, slouching in the shitty office chair that creaks pathetically under her.

"I… Uh…" Shen Yuan grimaces at not having a perfect segway into another conversation topic or reply. Thankfully, Luo Binghe is within earshot to rescue him. He sets his backpack on the desk and skilfully inserts himself in the conversation.

"Lifestyle changes are always worse in the beginning. I'm sure it won't feel so bad in a few weeks. But you could try lavenders on your nightstand for better sleep."

Shen Yuan takes the assist and simply nods. The conversation continues and at every turn, it makes Luo Binghe sure of one thing: this *commute* is something that is universally hated. The longer it is, the worse one's quality of life. When Luo Binghe mentions his five-minute walk to work, they both groan with deep-seated envy.

Shen Yuan has an extremely long list of things he loathes about commuting, which make their female colleague stop listening halfway through the conversation in favor of working. Shen Yuan, of course, doesn't even notice. He's been talking while only staring at Luo Binghe for five minutes straight.

“Fifteen minutes to walk to the nearest stop,” Luo Binghe adds it to his little list, point 12, “Then forty minutes by subway, where I have to change lines once,” point 13, “both lines are crowded with people who wouldn’t understand proper transport etiquette even if they had to take a mandatory 20-hour course on it,” point 14, “and…”

By the time he’s done, Luo Binghe has instead moved all his complaints under another window titled “Shen Yuan’s commute.”

His next move couldn’t be more obvious: he needs to figure out the real nature of this monster. For if it is as Shen Yuan says, then fixing this one issue could improve his health, both through letting him have more time to sleep and decreasing his stress levels. He’s read about this daily trial in the light novels he has to skim: a commute is the perfect spot for a protagonist to bump into the object of his desires. In a packed train car, he can keep watch and pray that she stumbles into him and he’s conveniently ready to support her, while also getting a feel for her body.

His following off-day is the first one he spends out of his apartment.

He asks a neighbor about the closest subway station, sporting his best charming smile. After ten minutes of walking, he spots a trail of bright red signs that take him towards one of the bigger intersections of the city, where many entrances lead underground. Are all the entrances the same? Or will they lead to different subway lines? Is this creation akin to a man-made cave system, where all the entrances lead, after tortuous winding, to a central hub?

Unsure, he walks up to the signpost in front of him. As soon as he’s standing on the top, looking down at the stairs leading underground, he finds the entrance barred with a metal cage. No matter.

After a couple minutes of walking and patiently waiting for traffic lights to turn green, whilst silently reminiscing about flying swords, he finds the second entrance. This one has caution tape hastily hung from side to side, as workers take up not only the escalators they’re working on but also the regular stairs, for some reason. Sighing about the minuscule power of the individual in the society he has woken up into, he turns on his heels. Another incense time passes before he’s crossed and found the third entrance. Chest tight in anticipation, he peers into the staircase while gripping Pen Mo. All clear. People, none of whom don a smile, are walking up and down those stairs.

Finally, he can descend.

The walls are painted a scarily bright red. Competent people, familiar with their surroundings, walk while giving sidelong, murderous glances to those who linger or mingle. Unwilling to become one of them, Luo Binghe walks towards one of the giant maps printed on the walls. In front of him stands an intricate web that resembles a grid in its middle, and sprawls out into tendrils towards its edges. Each line is a different color, and a myriad of names and warnings are scattered over them.

Aiming only to explore, Luo Binghe decides that he’ll do as he’s used to: walk up to the carriage driver, simply inquire as to where he’s going, and request that he stop whenever he feels like leaving.

Luo Binghe, unfortunately, then encounters a series of trials and tribulations.

First, his path is blocked by mechanical roadblocks. Other citizens are inserting tickets, presenting their phones or wallets, all in different spots, to gain access. He walks towards the red machines that resemble the fridge in his apartment, and the cash machines from which Mobei-jun draws money for him each week, using a bright blue card that rests in Luo Binghe's wallet. A myriad of buttons stare back at him, taunting him with their hidden meanings. After pressing randomly, the machine finally births a ticket stub. One would think that his journey had reached its end, and yet every hero must overcome adversity at every turn. Inserting the stub in the little roadblocks does not reward him with passage, but only with a bright red light. A screen comes to life, with a robotic voice who would be *best friends* with the System, announcing to the uninterested crowd that "the wrong ticket has been selected, please purchase the correct ticket." The machine does not communicate what exactly *is* wrong with his ticket, leaving him to guess. Only through the goodwill of a pitiful onlooker, does Luo Binghe acquire the proper ticket.

After gaining access to the system, a labyrinth of signs and numbers stretches on around him, living and breathing under the city. The trains, running through the tunnels, create air currents that reach even the most faraway spot, where Luo Binghe is standing. There, he can also still feel a cold current from the outside, sneaking its way in the subway system. The convergence of dead, underground currents and dirty air from the streets outside creates an amalgamation of terrible energy. No wonder Shen Yuan is so stressed.

He picks a direction at random and keeps descending, more and more, until he stands on a platform. When the train arrives, he's in the perfect position to see tempered glass and a carriage driver who is utterly *not* open and able to speak to anyone. Thus, Luo Binghe simply decides to step on the train.

Just then, a myriad of problems come at him all at once. A group of schoolchildren, all dressed in the same bright ochre dresses, pour into the carriage and around him. Their short and chubby shizun is desperately trying to contain them, to no avail, while silently begging for the help of those around her. The commuters crowd in after the children, annoyance obvious in their expressions. At once Luo Binghe, who had never in his life been crowded before, feels a nauseating presence all around him. Hands brush against his shoulders, blindly searching for anything to grip, shoulders bump against him, legs tangle all around him in a weird mess.

When the train starts moving, he jolts back for a moment, moving with the flow of the crowd. A kid is grabbing at his leg. He's asking something, but the thrum of the engine is deafening, and everyone has started speaking *so damn loud* to compensate that he can't even hear a word the little bastard is uttering. An old lady is suddenly tugging at his sleeve and asking *him* if this train will stop at Hougang Plaza. How the fuck would Luo Binghe know?

Unable to take it, he gets off at the following spot. He stumbles into a dirty corner that has not been cleaned in years. The mere thought of using this hellish system to accurately get to work on time every day sends shivers down his spine. He crouches down, studying the patterns in the dirt, that somehow look more understandable than the map.

"System." He mutters, not even bothering to conceal his voice. "How many points for a car?"

After spending most of his OP, leaving a mere one hundred in case of emergencies (low-level ones, at that), a shitty, beaten-down car instantly materializes in his apartment building's garage. At the same time, the very basic knowledge of driving is instilled in his mind. He spends the night practicing driving around the empty parking lot.

Convincing Shen Yuan to accept a ride from him is a surprisingly easy task. The man's eyes gleam as soon as he gets an opportunity to avoid the subway. He doesn't even question why Luo Binghe would make such an offer if it means adding about an hour of commuting to his morning and afternoons.

Luo Binghe is, of course, always on time. And since the very first time he picks Shen Yuan up, the System dings with notifications slowly decreasing his stress. It happens even before Luo Binghe gets to his doorstep. As Shen Yuan wakes up, his gratitude for having been able to wake up later than usual immediately improves both stress and health levels. Those chimes slowly become Luo Binghe's new personal alarm system

On the first day, Shen Yuan is already standing on the curb, patiently waiting, body stiff from nerves. He can't help a slight sneer at the sight of Luo Binghe's banged-up, olive-green little box of a car, but he immediately suppresses it. Luo Binghe barely manages to hide a chuckle.

[15. Shen Yuan cannot seem to stop his emotions from showing on his face, even when he knows he should conceal them.]

The man trots to the passenger side of the car and gets in his seat, where his usual bento box, carefully wrapped in a colorful handkerchief, awaits him. He's as tense as a bowstring, barely even looking towards Luo Binghe. The car jerks to a start, as Shen Yuan begins to speak.

"Thank you. I'm beginning to believe that simply showing you around your work, which is something that *should* be done with newcomers, is not nearly enough to warrant this. But… I'll take it." He pauses, decidedly ignoring the way Luo Binghe brakes at the very last second at a red light. *It was my fault for getting in the car with someone who grew up in a cult, really. He was probably isolated and just started learning how to drive.* "Still… there's some things we should reach an agreement on."

"Mh?"

"People around the office… Well, those gossips notice anything. They've got nothing better to do with their time. I know most have noticed you bring my lunches. If we were spotted going to the office together… It would be career suicide. Not that it would take much, from me. But it would surely be for you as well. Thus, I believe you should park at the company building *opposite* ours. Then, one of us will walk out and into the office, while the other one waits for about five or so minutes before walking in as well."

Luo Binghe doesn't know whether he should laugh or cry. Shen Yuan is suggesting those pathetic tactics that his sect brothers and sisters would use whenever they were trying to hide a relationship from the rest. Not that it ever worked. Their shizun was much too sharp for that. Still, no one in the office seems quite as sharp as him, except for Mobei-jun. And

thankfully, he's the one Luo Binghe does not need to guard against. He decides there's no harm in indulging his charge.

"That is sensible, senior. I'll follow your advice."

So, they sneakily make their way to the opposite parking lot, with their totally inconspicuous, broken down, and *especially loud* car. Thinking they're in the clear, Luo Binghe simply relaxes in his seat.

"You go, senior. I'll wait and join you in a few minutes."

"Mh." Shen Yuan nods. As soon as he's out of the car, carefully closing the door because he's *clearly* afraid that the car will simply break down if he slams it, he's blinded by extremely expensive headlights.

In front of them, is a sleek, pitch-black car that is half the height of Luo Binghe's. Inside, Mobei-jun is staring right at them. Next to him, sits Shang Qinghua, eyes wide and signature shaking present as always. In a flash, Shen Yuan does a 180, turning around as if it might shield him in any way from his friend's gaze. Mobei-jun exits his car, looking comically large next to it.

"Out, Qinghua."

The shorter man stumbles out of the car, much less graceful. He falls to his knees and has to grip the door to stand up once more, knees marked with dirt. "But, Sir!" He shakes. "We can't—"

Neither Luo Binghe nor Shen Yuan hear the rest of the sentence, for Mobei-jun picks Qinghua up by the scruff of his neck, as if he were some sort of pet, and carries him out of sight. Luo Binghe wonders just how the man's stress levels are faring.

"So, senior…"

"We'll still park here. Let me at least spare myself from the shame of the whole office, even if I already got caught by my own boss and colleague. At the very least, Qinghua won't tattle about this."

As he predicted, Luo Binghe notices the two men completely avoiding each other's gazes for multiple days at work. Everyone notices. The women who sit in front of them start believing that Shen Yuan and Qinghua had some sort of break-up. Luo Binghe takes care to never let Shen Yuan hear those rumors.

Chapter 9: In sickness and in health

Chapter Summary

Shen Yuan gets sick out of nowhere. Luo Binghe goes mama hen mode.

[Commencing trope #05: Fever]

Luo Binghe's brain is being fried by tropes and excessive exposition, when the System's alarm starts blaring.

[ATTENTION: Shen Yuan's health points decreased by 100.]

Luo Binghe is out of his seat in an instant. He'd thought nothing of it when Shen Yuan had not shown up outside of his apartment that day. He'd called Mobei-jun, who had confirmed that the man had taken a single day off, citing a mild fever. Since the System hadn't notified him of any significant drops in health, Luo Binghe had figured that it was a simple case of wanting to stay home and relax for a change.

He's packed all of his stuff in his backpack in less than five seconds. His little stunt with the car means that he's still more than a few paychecks away from an *actually useful* upgrade. A real-time permanent addition to his System's UI of Shen Yuan's detailed stress and health stats. He doesn't even think about knocking before barging into Mobei-jun's office. Shang Qinghua is sitting at a pathetically small desk, hunched over as he types away.

"I'd like to request to go home early today. Right now." Luo Binghe's eyes meet Mobei-jun's. The man is sharp and immediately rises as well. In a single flutter of his raven eyelashes, which Luo Binghe recognizes as the other man communicating with his System, they understand one another.

[Function unlocked: Overtime Point exchange!]

[10000 OP received from Mobei-jun. Send a note as thanks?]

"Not the time!! Unlock Shen Yuan's stress and health bars! Right now!"

[UI Expansion pack unlocked. 2850 OP remaining.]

Two horizontal bars appear right on the top of Luo Binghe's vision, next to a little icon of a … cucumber. *Huh.* The first, *"HP"*, is a deep carmine, and stretches about halfway through his field of vision. The lower one, *"SP"*, is a bright azure, and doesn't even reach a third of the way through.

Luo Binghe nods at his boss, not even bothering to wonder just *how* he got so many OP. He's out the door and into his car in an instant. He doesn't bother to hide the way his eyes are wide and manic. The driving is as erratic as it gets, as he keeps getting notifications from the System.

[ATTENTION: Shen Yuan's health levels dropped by 100.]

[ATTENTION: Shen Yuan's health levels dropped by 100.]

[ATTENTION: Shen Yuan's health levels dropped by 100.]

The red bar drops dangerously low, to half its original size. Is this the moment Shen Yuan dies? Suddenly, all the time spent working and taking it slow with his manipulation of the man seems utterly stupid and careless. He parks in a frankly disgusting way in front of Shen Yuan's apartment building. Not that he has the time to care about this.If Shen Yuan survives this, then he can go buy an offering to ask forgiveness for the inconveniences he caused with his shitty parking job, and get his karma back on track. If he doesn't, there won't be a Luo Binghe to apologize in this world anyway.

System. Tell me where his apartment is.

[Class-A information purchased. 1850 OP remaining.]

[Shen Yuan lives on the fourth floor. His door is the last one on the left.]

Luo Binghe pushes his body fully to leap over the stairs to the first floor. He hadn't realized just how weak this body would quickly become by leading a life of sitting around and reading shitty novels. He slams his fist on the door, over and over, barely registering the leeks falling from his grasp.

"Senior, are you well? It's Luo Binghe. Mobei-jun made me leave work early to check up on you."

No noise comes from the inside of the apartment.

Is there any way for me to open this door?

[Calculating…]

[ATTENTION: Shen Yuan's health levels dropped by 100.]

Speed up in this instant!

"Shen Yuan! Open this door!" He grunts while banging his fist on the door.

[Skill Point package: spend 1500 OP to unlock lockpicking ability at level 3?]

Yes!

[Skill tree unlocked! Three points spent on the Lockpicking Ability. Congratulations!]

[350 OP remaining.]

Growling, he snaps the metal ring off Pen Mo and jams it in the keyhole. His hand moves on its own, fingers twitching left and right almost imperceptibly. With a click, the door swings open. He stumbles in, closing the door with a kick of his heel. The layout of the apartment, its mess and its darkness barely register, because he can immediately hear weak groaning from an adjacent room. He drops the food on the small kitchenette's counter and runs into it.

Shen Yuan is lying on the smallest bed Luo Binghe has ever seen. He's writhing in a pool of his own sweat. Luo Binghe instantlysits next to him, the bed dipping under his weight. He leans closer, forehead pressing against Shen Yuan's. The man is burning up, as he expected.

"Senior." He leans back, speaking softly and sweetly, the way Shen Yuan seems to appreciate the most. "Senior, it's me. Can you open your eyes and tell me about your symptoms? When did they start?"

Shen Yuan's head lolls from side to side. His hair sticks to his forehead and makes him appear even more sickly. His glasses are nowhere to be seen, and make him appear much more like Luo Binghe's shizun. But when he opens his eyes, those limpid pools of water are filled with a tenderness that he's never seen in the cruel man.

"Binghe…? How…?"

"Please, senior, do not worry about that. Mobei-xiansheng told me you were sick and gave me half the day off. I've got some medicine. Can you tell me what you're feeling?"

"Mhn..." Shen Yuan starts sitting up but is immediately pushed back down by Luo Binghe. Whereas he would normally glare at his junior, in this state, he simply lets it happen. "I ate… a discount meal last night. I… I think something was wrong with it… Or maybe my stomach simply isn't used to two meals a day. You've been spoiling it, Binghe." He groans, hand bracing on his stomach.

"And you didn't eat or drink anything since your reaction last night?"

Shen Yuan pitifully shakes his head.

"Are you serious…?" Luo Binghe growls, before reining in his annoyance at this man who is *not* making things easier for him. He clears his throat, licking his lips and softening his gaze. "Senior, it's the middle of the afternoon. I've got some medicine here, let me get you something to drink, and then I'll cook something up. Could I use your kitchen?"

Shen Yuan's hand pats around his blankets until his slender fingers nimbly wrap around Luo Binghe's wrist, their touch feather-light. In a previous life, such an act from a blushing maiden would have been enough to get Luo Binghe ready to go, but in this body, barely his own, it doesn't even elicit a shiver.

"Don't… don't go. I'm not… I'm not well."

“I’m just getting up to grab your stuff, senior. I’m not going anywhere.” Luo Binghe whispers. “I promise.”

[Shen Yuan's stress levels decreased by 50 points.]

Stress?!?! I’m here to fix his health!

He turns around to hide the way his eyebrow is twitching. He gets up and pretends not to notice the way Shen Yuan’s hand keeps patting around the spot where he just was, looking for his arm to cling to.

Thankfully, Shen Yuan is a compliant patient. He gulps down the water Luo Binghe offers, slowly. He only grimaces like a little kid at the taste of the pill and grumbles something about how it was uncomfortable to swallow, but does not protest against it.

“Sweet…”

“Senior—” Luo Binghe can’t even suppress his laughter, half-mocking, half-sincere. He wonders if it’s the first time he’s laughed in this world. Not that he did it often in the previous one, anyway. “I’m not giving you sweets while you’re going through food poisoning. I won’t add oil to the fire I’m trying to extinguish.”

“Mnhn…” Shen Yuan grumbles as Luo Binghe leaves the room once more. This time, his hand pats around the nightstand for his phone. Luo Binghe spots a dark blue webpage, filled with repeating low-quality patterns of swords and beasts. Light text in extremely small characters fills the whole screen, but Luo Binghe doesn’t focus much on it, simply catching a glimpse as he leaves the room. The only image pressed into his mind, is Shen Yuan’s finger, obsessively refreshing the page, even in his fever-induced delirious state.

Shen Yuan’s kitchenette is truly pitiful. Small and dirty, the kind of dirt that has been accumulating for decades from previous tenants, and that seems almost like a glossy finish to the untrained eye. But that’s a problem for another day. Luo Binghe uproots the whole organization system of the cupboards, before coming to the realization that Shen Yuan simply does not have enough pots and utensils. The man’s fridge is in an even more pitiful state. Half-empty, half full of packaged ingredients that are the opposite of healthy. It forces his hand, and he has to make an extremely simple white rice porridge, with some green onion garnish, sliced and seared meat, and ginger strips, thinly sliced and hidden in between the slices of meat, since he knows Shen Yuan can be picky about them, but he needs them for his recovery.

By the time he’s back in Shen Yuan’s dark room, the man’s phone has been dropped to the ground. Shen Yuan is leaning out of his bed, whining as he tries to reach the ground. Luo Binghe allows himself a single fraction of a second to imagine his shizun in such a pitiful position, totally and completely at his mercy. He relishes in the small moment of satisfaction, before setting the bowl of congee on the small dark wooden nightstand. He grabs the phone and immediately locks it, setting it out of Shen Yuan’s reach.

“Senior, you must stop reaching over. Do not upset your stomach any further.” The sweet and tender words feel alien in his mouth right after imagining a long-haired man with a much

more sour face in place of Shen Yuan. Still, he's no stranger to alien words rolling off his tongue. Today is simply the first time they don't taste as sweet.

Shen Yuan, completely unaware of the tribulation in Luo Binghe's mind, instead focuses on the inviting smell wafting over from the congee. "Congee…"

"Yes, senior. You like this kind of meat when I put it in your lunchboxes, yes? You never leave any leftovers. So eat up. Slowly." He's not sure why he gives the instruction, since he's the one hand-feeding the useless man.

Luo Binghe watches as Shen Yuan's lips close around the spoon. The pearly, watery consistency of the congee spills out of his mouth and glints over his lips. He's such a messy eater and doesn't even realize it, simply following Luo Binghe's hand movements and commands with half-lidded, wet eyes. He's never looked quite so much like a blushing maiden. He's softer in his sickness, and Luo Binghe's meal plans are just starting to show, plumping his cheeks just slightly from their usual gauntness.

As soon as the bowl is empty, Shen Yuan looks like he's about to pass out. Luo Binghe barely manages to get another glass of water and medicine in his, before his head hits the pillow.

"Mhm… grab my spare key, Binghe. For emergencies… Never even give it to anyone..." Shen Yuan's eyes are closed before the sentence is even over, and his breathing steadies soon afterward.

Luo Binghe turns off Shen Yuan's phone and sighs. He shoots Mobei-jun a text, asking (without bothering with a question mark) for Shen Yuan to have a few days off.

The following day, Shen Yuan wakes up at around 3 PM. After stumbling to his phone, he finds a WeChat text thread from his new boss, telling him in a far kinder tone than he's ever read from a boss, that he's got three days off to properly recover. In that instant, he barely remembers flashes of Luo Binghe's face from the previous night, almost wondering if he hallucinated him. He's got no clue how deep he would even dig his own grave if it were real.

Walking into his living room confirms his worst nightmare. The windows are ajar, the air fresher than he's ever felt in this wretched apartment. The couch looks slightly dented, and a few long hairs rest on the pillows. On the coffee table, over his collection of "The Other World's Books Depend on the Bean Counter", a sticky note stands out. The handwriting is delicate and immaculate. It reads: "Senior, I gave you some medicine which you will find on the counter in your bathroom. I opened the windows to get some fresh air in. You will find five portions of congee in your fridge. I've started a cycle in the washing machine. I hope you will forgive me for sleeping on your couch, but I wanted to wait until morning to check that your temperature had steadied. I even took the liberty of contacting Mobei-xiansheng on WeChat about your sickness. Please call me if your condition worsens."

He didn't even bother signing the note. Shen Yuan falls to his knees in shame.

On the other side of the city, Luo Binghe breathes a sigh of relief at the steady rise of Shen Yuan's health and stress points. In his backpack, an addition to his keyring: a small key with a silicone cover in the shape of a panda.

Chapter 10: Monster Cock

Chapter Summary

Shen Yuan is late for work. Luo Binghe investigates.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[Commencing trope #06: R-Rating.]

The following weeks pass by without any events of notice. They work side by side, with Shen Yuan's condition slowly improving. Their new routines bring them closer. Between the homemade lunches and their drives together, Shen Yuan seems to be softening. Shen Yuan scowls less often (although only marginally so).

That is, until for the first time, Shen Yuan is late for his ride. Luo Binghe got to his place *slightly* earlier than usual, but that never stopped Shen Yuan from being ready as soon as he texted. Luo Binghe figures that he's slacking because they had a 9:00 AM team meeting which got canceled abruptly during the night, citing Mobei-jun not being in the office.

"Tsk. Lazy." Luo Binghe gets out of the rattling car, grabs two hot steamed buns from the corner store, and trots up the stairs of Shen Yuan's apartment building, the juices dripping on his wrist.

"Shen Yuan! Coming in, I've got breakfast." He yells out. He doesn't even bother checking his phone to see if Shen Yuan replied to his texts, nor does he try to listen for noises inside of Shen Yuan's apartment. His fingers are already finding the small silicone panda in his pocket and unlocking the door. When he doesn't find Shen Yuan in his living room, he grumbles something about how oversleeping would have gotten him ten lashes on Qing Ding Peak.

He's kicking the door to Shen Yuan's bedroom open, licking his wrist still marked by reddish seasoned oils, when his gaze finds the other man.

He's kneeling on the floor, wearing *only* an old oversized t-shirt and a pair of expensive-looking headphones, eyes closed, eyelids fluttering, mouth agape. The sounds of sloshing and a *very* deep male voice leak from his headphones. And most importantly, he's lowering himself on an appendix that looks scarily inhuman. It's uneven, with spikes at the bottom and ridges all over its length. The tip is buried in Shen Yuan's puckered hole, and he is clearly working his way down while gripping the soft toy with one hand from behind. Or at least, *was.* As soon as he opens his eyes and fully focuses them on Luo Binghe, all traces of pleasure and relaxation are gone from his face. His brow rises and he gasps, going red *all over his body.* He slips for a moment, the monster cock going a couple of centimeters deeper into him, stretching him out even more.

[Shen Yuan's stress levels increased by 300 points.]

“You—!” He starts protesting while swiftly straightening up from the phallus, clearly too quickly, since a shiver runs through his whole body. A single line of white drips down his twitching cock in a ruined orgasm, but he manages to *mostly* contain a moan, instead sitting in front of the abomination, and hiding himself as much as he can with his t-shirt. Which only makes an adorable wet spot stand out against the beige color.

“Get out! What are you still doing here?! I gave you a key for *emergencies!*”

Luo Binghe is frozen for a moment, before remembering *just* where Shen Yuan’s stress level bar is. He closes the door behind him, one last look at Shen Yuan’s flushed knees, and slumps down on the floor.

“Senior, there is nothing to be ashamed of—”

[Shen Yuan's stress levels increased by 100 points.]

Shit.

“ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME?!” Shen Yuan screams. Luo Binghe is scared he’ll start using the monstrous phallus as a makeshift weapon or javelin.

“No! I am not, truly! Senior Yuan followed my advice on relaxing by using physical methods! Sure, I recommended a woman for swapping energies, but people need different things, catered to them. Although… I do not know what *that* was.” Luo Binghe hums.

“You—”

“Let me come in and help you, senior.” Luo Binghe prays that his calculations will be fruitful and that an initial increase in stress levels is all he’ll have to bear before it decreases again. “I can help you reach full completion, and you can teach me what those things are, hmm?”

[Shen Yuan's stress levels increased by 25 points.]

Hm. Much less than I’d anticipated.

“Shameless— You— I cannot even begin—” There’s a pause. “Fine. If you already saw me in such a pitiful state, I might as well put you in the same position.”

“Senior,” Luo Binghe chuckles. “It’s okay. I don’t impress easily. It doesn’t have to be anything more than me apologizing for ruining a nice time, hm?”

“It—” Shen Yuan’s erratic breathing suddenly calms. Luo Binghe can sense his pout from out the door. “It’s already ruined. I can’t—”

Luo Binghe doesn’t let him finish the sentence. He sneakily opens the door and peeks in. He hesitates to enter until Shen Yuan gives him a very, *very* shy nod. Luo Binghe crawls in until he’s crouched on the floor, his warmth radiating into Shen Yuan’s skin even without contact.

“We’ll see about that. So. What is that?”

“Ah… ehm… Slater. The Stone Wyvern.” He nods towards a cardboard box shoved in the back of the room. It’s dented and broken up, but the lettering and image of the toy can both be seen. A small mountain of smaller containers peeks out from behind it, promising a wide variety of toys. Luo Binghe can’t help but tilt his head.

“But those… Those don’t exist?” Has his understanding of this world been incorrect? Do powerful monsters imbued with qi exist in this world? Maybe then, there’s a chance for him to find his way to his old self, his powers, his *purpose*—

“Well, no,” Shen Yuan chuckles awkwardly. “It’s just… a company that makes that stuff. They sort of invent designs inspired by mythological creatures. It’s… not that I care about the roleplaying aspect! It’s just that the design provides… a unique experience.”

Tch.

Luo Binghe nods towards the toy, leaning side to side and trying to take a proper peek at it. Shen Yuan moves in tandem with him, blocking his view. “I can see that. And you do that stuff before work?”

“No! Not always! I simply took the opportunity today, since our boss will be out of the office. No one will care if I’m ten minutes late.”

“Tsk, tsk, senior.” Luo Binghe teases with a click of his tongue and a devilish smile, the polar opposite of the usual complacent innocence he knows Shen Yuan is weak for. “What happened to your work ethic?”

[Shen Yuan’s romance points increased by 5.]

“Do not—”

“C’mon, senior.” He leans closer, a sardonic smile teasing the blushing man. “Doing something *so* intense before work? I’d have understood a quick rub, but *this*...”

“Shut it, you vixen. I simply followed your advice. Shall you incessantly tease me for it?” Shen Yuan sighs. “I had the time, the *need*, and the tools.”

“The time? Really? Even with a fifteen-minute, or hells, thirty-minute, leeway, you wouldn’t be able to take your time with this and clean up. What’s the set-up like with this stuff, anyway?”

“Focusing on such details… shameless.” He turns his head. “It’s got a suction cup. So… I just have to pick the video, clean the toy and lather it with water-based lube, stretch for a bit, and… that’s it.”

“How long did it take you?”

“Thirty minutes.”

Luo Binghe laughs. His hand reaches Shen Yuan's knee. Static crackles under his digits. "Then, let's say, twenty minutes for a shower and cleaning up… Senior, that leaves you, what, five minutes to actually work on *yourself*?"

"There's…" Shen Yuan's blush deepens, making those clear pools of jade light up even more. "There's no need for more."

Luo Binghe freezes. "Five minutes? From behind?"

Shen Yuan nods.

Luo Binghe can't help but chuckle. "Seriously? Do you even do something enjoyable or just ram it in? Or is it so formidable that it actually works *that* fast?"

"I do not *ram* it in!" He scoffs. "I just don't need much time for such things, is all."

Luo Binghe rolls his eyes. "Fine, fine. Ah, senior," he nudges the plate of meat buns in front of him. "Breakfast. Got it in the corner store right below here. I didn't know they had warm stuff so early. How come you never brought any to your driver, hmm?"

"I'd always assumed you took your breakfast at home. Why would I get you something you never asked for nor ever expressed an interest in?"

"How could I not be interested in a second breakfast?"

"How is this conversation productive towards your goal in this roo—"

Before Shen Yuan can finish his section, Luo Binghe's hand sneaks underneath the oversized t-shirt, a ghost of a caress over his inner thigh. The man shudders, goosebumps breaking out over his legs, and, most importantly, the tip of his dick makes itself known, bumping the shirt and showing its outline to Luo Binghe.

"Getting you distracted so your body can recharge, senior." He nods to the boxes. "How about you show one of those technological wonders to your junior?"

It takes a few seconds of panting for Shen Yuan to brace himself after a simple caress. "Shameless…" He mutters, leaning back to grab one of the smaller boxes. "I do hope you're not hoping to use my shower after this."

Luo Binghe barely listens to his words, instead using the man's distraction to snatch the girthy member away. It's softer than he expected, jiggly like a maiden's bosom. Running his fingers over the ridges provides a unique feeling, but not one that sets a fire in his loins.

In his previous life, his mind had been rattled by fantasies, especially after his fall in the Abyss. This current body, so similar to his own, with an almost perfectly matched face, long, thick chestnut hair, and similar build, feels utterly alien to him. Where his previous body hummed with qi, powers ready to spring forth at a single thought, this shell was… entirely unresponsive. In every single possible way. So he's not surprised that such an erotic abomination stirs no feelings inside him, especially in front of the man who looks like his most loathed enemy. He's no looker like the delicate Qin Wanyue, that's for sure.

“Here. I’m not letting you get my stuff dirty. Lower body prep would take too long.” He tosses a rubbery contraption at him. “A cock ring.”

“This does not look like a ring.” Luo Binghe mumbles, pointing towards the elongated appendix that extends from the pair of rubber rings.

Shen Yuan doesn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “Yes, the rings go on the base, or around our balls. The length stimulates… *your length.*”

“Huh.” Luo Binghe pretends to have understood any part of that. “And are we going to listen to the nice man on the computer?”

A genuine laugh erupts from Shen Yuan’s chest. “You want that? Have you ever listened to an R-18 audio CD? Scratch that, don’t even know why I asked. But… yes. We could. Might ease the awkwardness of this ridiculously embarrassing situation.”

“You wound me. Am I not helping you get going? Am I not earning the forgiveness of my senior?” He leans again, breath hitting Shen Yuan’s neck as he settles back down. “Because your lower half seems to disagree with you.”

[Shen Yuan’s romance points increased by 5 points.]

[Shen Yuan's stress levels increased by 10 points.]

Luo Binghe watches Shen Yuan’s body as it stretches, reaching for his desk, unplugging the headphones, and rewinding the audio CD. “If you’re to enjoy the audio, then you must cease your incessant teasing and talking.” An ambient sound of rainfall and wind blowing through trees, leaves whistling all around. Luo Binghe realizes it’s the first time he’s heard familiar noises since… months, by now. And it comes from an alternate-world version of erotic books that his shizun would scold students for sneaking in the peak. “In this one, we’re a good-for-nothing cultivator who goes on a hunt and has to take shelter in a cave because of a storm. Unfortunately, we’ve stumbled upon the lair of a half-qilin, half-man. So he…”

The sound of a thunderstorm booms through the room.

“No, it’s useless if we do it like this… completely ruins the magic and appeal of binaural ASMR…” Shen Yuan grumbles. With a disapproving shake of his head, he gets on in knees and leans on the desk, tinkering with a myriad of gadgets and tech items, while unintentionally giving Luo Binghe a perfect view of a milky white pair of thighs, small, soft ass, and beautifully puckered hole, leaking clear lube. A maiden would have never been so shameless nor careless in front of him, even the bold Sha Hualing. In his earnest disinterest in seducing Luo Binghe, Shen Yuan proves to be the most bold, and somehow, the most innocent-looking. It is exciting in its own right. The sight, finally, brings a twitch to his cock. Not caring for a half-naked display like Shen Yuan’s, he simply unzips his suit pants and lets his mostly-soft cock out, resting on his inner thigh.

A pair of headphones are shoved on his head, and he’s suddenly surrounded by the sound of rain and ragged breathing, that he instinctively feels is his own. Shen Yuan’s got his own pair of janky earbuds and is looking at him with an adorably tentative smile.

Luo Binghe's hand finds the other man's thigh once more, toy almost entirely forgotten in his other hand. He teases, watching as that adorable dick bobs under Shen Yuan's tee. He only intends to caress his thigh, not going too far as to not spook Shen Yuan. He is, after all, still afraid of Shen Yuan's SP bar plunge. He's not forgotten his mission. So he puts on his devious smile, watching Shen Yuan rise on his knees and position himself over the *monster.* He gazes hungrily, making sure the other man *knows* he's watching.

"Senio—"

He can't even hear his voice properly. At the same time, footsteps come closer from behind him. He whips around, ready to fend for himself, only to find the room empty. The footsteps get closer, still only present in his right ear. It sends tingles down his spine, and then…

"Puny human. I couldn't even sense your internal energy from outside. Is your cultivation so bad that you didn't manage to catch on that this cave is mine? My energy all around it, my claim over my home. Even the stupidest animals on this mountain avoid messing with me. But you, a shivering, weak ***little*** *mess, have the gull to encroach."*

Luo Binghe's eyes widen, and he turns to Shen Yuan. The bastard is giggling in delight, mocking his struggle. "Just enjoy it," he says rather loudly, over the noise in his ears.

The man with a deep voice is still talking about weakness, frailty, and egregiously *wrong* cultivation precepts. Luo Binghe understands why a man like Shen Yuan would enjoy it. Meanwhile, he feels the back of his neck prickling, feeling the *wrongness* of having one of his senses almost completely turned off. At the same time…

"Can you even cultivate with this frail body of yours? I'm sure you're the shame of your peak. They probably sent you out here so you'd get lost and die." A noise comes from the headphones. The ripping of clothes. *"Weak. But this body is decent. It can still pay for room and board in my home, at least for one night. Will you allow it, sweetling?"* Those last words are whispered closer to the ear, lower and softer. Luo Binghe thinks that they're not much different from the low-level light novels he skims daily, but having them read out loud has a *completely* different effect. Luo Binghe's cock twitches again.

He barely even noticed how Shen Yuan had already started sitting on the dildo, rotating his hips back and forth to feel the full strength of the ridges against his inner walls. Eyes half-lidded like before, but still gazing at Luo Binghe. His choppy hair falls forward on his forehead and gives an adorably disheveled look to the man.

"Use your words, sweetling." Shen Yuan's hips buck forward at the command. Wetness spreads on his shirt, cum leaking back on his hidden length, onto his balls, and then on the rubber cock. He doesn't stop their ritual, instead catching his breath for a moment.

[Shen Yuan's stress levels decreased by 200 points.]

"Good." The voice growls. *"You know your place, then. But don't worry. Since it's your first time, I'll be merciful, little cultivator. It's more than you deserve."* The sound of a caress. Then, the wet sounds of kissing and licking, which Luo Binghe could *swear* came right from his own neck.

Closing his eyes, he lets his eyes the sounds set his body aflame, as they travel in tingles under his skin. He grabs the rubber ring and fits it around his semi-hard head, placing the ridged device against his length. He's still confused about the purpose of such an item, but he doesn't question it.

The assertive worshipping of his body from the man in his ears goes on for a while. He can perfectly imagine a tongue running all over his neck, placing wet kisses on his shoulders, describing all the ways in which they're moving and touching. Only a groan comes from Luo Binghe's throat.

The qilin hybrid then lies on the ground. *"Come, sweetling. Place your buttocks on my face. Don't hesitate. I'm being gracious, offering to ease your body into it. So do not test my kindness."*

When slurping noises seem to come from *under* him, Luo Binghe finally shudders slightly. It's still nowhere near enough to get him close to reaching climax, of course. The same can't be said about Shen Yuan.

Luo Binghe, in the sole interest of research for his mission, knows he has to open his eyes and *watch*. See what makes Shen Yuan tick. In a few short minutes, the man has worked his way down the phallus, almost all the way. He's thrusting up and down, slowly and gently letting the ridges do all the work for him. And, Heavens, the tip of the object is almost… protruding, its tip showing on the front of Shen Yuan's stomach, as it moves up and down. The erotic sight takes Luo Binghe out of the immersion immediately, instead string holes in Shen Yuan's flat belly, the way he leans back on his palms, making the protrusion even more apparent.

Suddenly, memories of fucking Qin Wanyue in a dark cave overlap with the sounds coming out of his headphones. Before he knows it, *he's* the half-qilin, lying under Shen Yuan as he uses all his pathetic flexibility to lean back on his monstrous cock. The dimly lit room doesn't help. The way his beige shirt could *almost* be confused with Qin Wanyue's exquisite golden uniform that night.

Luo Binghe is wrapped into a whirlwind of overlapping memories, of feminine and masculine faces, of a little bulge bobbing up and down and searing its image into his mind, when Shen Yuan shudders. Without even touching his member, he cums on his own stomach. The sight of his seed pooling up inside his navel is the last thing Luo Binghe allows himself to look at, closing his eyes before Shen Yuan can open his own and catch him staring.

A few seconds pass. Luo Binghe thinks he *should* be in the clear. *Bzz.*

Suddenly, a strong vibration hits his cock. He groans, breath catching in his throat. He opens his eyes to find Shen Yuan *too* close as he presses a button on the bright blue contraption. The fucker is *winking*.

"Fuck—" Luo Binghe's breathless, barely understanding the intensity of what's happening on his cock. "Fuck, you wretched—"

With the sound of slurping in his ears, and Shen Yuan's thumb so very lightly grazing against his cock as he fixes the position of the ring, he reaches the edge, thick strings of semen coating Shen Yuan's hand.

[Shen Yuan's stress levels decreased by 100 points.]

Not waiting for a single moment of reprieve, Luo Binghe rips the headphones off his head. "What is this— this contraption— hellish contraption—"

"Huh? The first time is always intense, but it was just the lowest setting." Shen Yuan mocks him. "Besides, we have to clean up and get to the office. I had to do *something.* I'll consider the meat buns as compensation for the extra work. Go heat them up."

Shen Yuan doesn't spare him another gaze as he gets up and begins gathering the items and moving them towards the bathroom, to clean up both them and himself. Still, Luo Binghe can easily spot the way the tips of his ears are bright red, his fingertips slightly shaking.

They quickly forget all about getting to work on time. As they lounge in the kitchen, eating two stiff meat buns, the uneasy silence is broken by Shen Yuan.

"That man writes his own scripts. As far as I know. He could have had a decent career with low-level light novels. Still, it's better this way. Those inaccuracies in his cultivation lore would have had him thrown to the wolves on debut. Calling a clearly demon-coded beast a *qilin hybrid.* Ugh."

Luo Binghe's eyes light up. "Indeed, senior!" In just a few seconds, he's back to his doe-eyed self, "Indeed, and what about when he said the qilin have the power to look into a person's soul? Preposterous."

They slow down, the last few bites of the meat buns resting on their respective plates. Both of them know that as soon as they're done eating, duty will make it so they'll have to rush to the office. But for now, as the last few bites cool down, they chat about mythology, cultivation, and shitty light novels.

Chapter End Notes

We're halfway though the fic! Phew!!

The rest of the fic has already been completed! I will start posting the chapters, week by week, starting from the 5th of April, after the posting period of the event has ended <3
I hope these chapters keep you company until then, and that you look forward to reading the rest, and seeing the amazing art featured on this fic <3

Chapter 11: Proud Immortal Demon Way

Chapter Summary

In which Luo Binghe actually asks important questions to make the plot move forward.

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains art by the amazing @dehloosquared on Twitter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Do you actually enjoy works such as these, seniors?” Luo Binghe whispers into the darkness of the office, illuminated only by his and Shen Yuan’s screens, as they work late at night to finish a project (a punishment from Mobei-jun for their missed morning). “You seem to loathe them, but at the same time, you know too much about them for it to simply be about work. And your eyes lit up while describing all the historical inaccuracies of the audio CD.”

“We need to work, Binghe.”

“C’mon, senior. We’ve been working since this morning without a break. How about… I go make a fresh cup of coffee, and you join me in the break room when it’s done?”

Shen Yuan’s eyelid twitches. He stretches his neck from side to side. “Fine. Go.”

Luo Binghe lets out a little giggle before he can stop himself, trotting along towards the break room. He moves quickly through the room, where all the ingredients have been arranged to his liking. No one has the gall to move them, not since the whole office realized that letting Luo Binghe have his way around the pots and microwaves makes everything ten times better. He’s even got designated cups in the cupboards. His and Shen Yuan’s are always stacked one on top of another, for ease of access.

It doesn’t take long to brew two steaming cups, and Shen Yuan doesn’t need to be called. He knows the sounds of Luo Binghe’s movements by heart, and is already there, eyes begging for a cup as soon as Luo Binghe is finished pouring.

Shen Yuan’s body slumps in a chair, signaling a longer break. He savors a couple of sips with closed eyes, left hand drawing circles and patterns on his thigh.

“I enjoy reading them on my time. A guilty pleasure of mine.”

“Do you not get tired of them, senior? Most people don’t wish to think about work when they clock off.”

Shen Yuan scoffs. “Indeed. But I started reading them while in secondary school. Joined this cursed company because I thought I wouldn’t feel the pressure of work if I was doing something I enjoyed. How could I have been so foolish? Reading slop for eight hours a day, and I thought I’d enjoy it.”

Luo Binghe rests his chin on his hand, head tilted as he studies Shen Yuan. “Then do you not enjoy any light novels anymore?”

He watches as Shen Yuan averts his gaze, the faintest of blushes spreading over his ears. But the man remains silent.

“C’mon, senior. You can tell your junior, yes?” Luo Binghe smiles, sickeningly sweet. “Or else this junior will stop making coffee for you and driving you to work.”

“You—!” Shen Yuan clenches his fist. “Fine. There is one particular work that has become a guilty pleasure of mine over the years. I’ve been reading it since the first chapter. To say it’s good would be an insult to the very concept of literature. It is the typical stallion novel, full of action scenes, clichés, and plot holes, the very kind that we would love to publish. Unfortunately, the author has denied all our requests to even negotiate.”

“Then, that’s where the animosity you feel comes from?”

Shen Yuan pauses. “No, not at all. Simply put, it… stopped updating, a while back.”

Luo Binghe spots the way the other man is fidgeting with the teacup, fingernails wandering over the porcelain and then on his skin, rubbing up and down nervously. The image of Shen Yuan, riddled by sickness, feverishly refreshing a webpage, flashes in his mind.

“Is it a hiatus? Did the author say when they’ll be back?”

“*He*. Could only be a he, writing that shit. But no. He just… stopped on a random chapter, when the protagonist was going through a myriad of tribulations. He was just about to escape a… rough situation. The setup was just completed, the *real* novel with all its revenge fantasy about to start, and then… nothing. Absolutely zero payoff for a mountain of slop.”

“Could it be that he got picked up by another publishing house?”

“Ew. No. We’re the only ones desperate enough to stoop so low. Maybe his inspiration finally died down. It did happen towards the end of an arc. I’d say that he could be plotting the next section of the novel, but I refuse to believe that wretched author has ever planned anything. Or maybe my comments got to him. Even then, it wasn’t like *I* was the only one commenting…”

Luo Binghe barely stifles a laugh. “You *comment*? Didn’t you tell me that those who comment criticism or hate on a work are the lowest scum of the earth, would just do better with closing the window, and I quote, *choosing another piece of trash from the same pile*?”

The glare Shen Yuan shoots him could *almost* rival Shen Qingqiu's. Almost. "That's why I told you it was a guilty pleasure. And I only commented because… as much as it pains me to admit it, it does have a lot of potential. There's something about the characters… the protagonist in particular, that could be decent, if not even good, if the author simply put in some *care* and dared to step outside the bounds of genre clichés. But he never does."

"Then is that what my senior enjoys? Those glimpses of talent?" He coos, placing another cube of sugar in Shen Yuan's cup. He's come to know the man's tastes: he believes that the coffee becomes bitter as it gets colder.

[Shen Yuan's stress levels decreased by 10 points.]

Shen Yuan nods in thanks. "Part of it was a force of habit. Same time every week, I'd read a chapter or two before sleeping. I'd check the comments, talk to the usual suspects, sometimes the author himself. It was a… comforting habit, however unusual. And it's been taken from me. The other part was… that the protagonist's voice was unique, in its trope-y bullshit. His name, it's got the same characters as yours, if you can believe it."

"I *can* believe it, senior. But I'd like to check for myself. What is this work called?"

"Tch. You push and push, but I'd really rather die than tell you the name of that slop. Figure it out for yourself."

System. How much to know the title of the work Shen Yuan is talking about?

[ERROR. UNABLE TO PURCHASE.]

Seriously…

Luo Binghe ups his charm. "Seeing my senior sitting on a *Slater, The Stone Wyvern* dildo is somehow less embarrassing than knowing about a guilty pleasure of his? My senior truly has a skewed sense of reality."

"Shameless!" Shen Yuan smacks his hand with the dirty spoon, only to blush profusely as Luo Binghe licks the incredibly sweet coffee right from the back of his hand. "Do not talk about such things in the office!"

"It's empty."

"You—!" He's red, from both rage and embarrassment. "You really are a little pest, behind those wide, innocent eyes. I won't take chances of you teasing me and questioning me about this when others are around. It's called Proud Immortal Demon Way. Now that you've got your way in this conversation once more, it's time we go back to work before I lose even more of my dignity."

"Proud Immortal Demon Way." Luo Binghe whispers, lounging on the desk of Mobei-jun's private office, away from prying eyes. He chews on a warm second-breakfast meat bun, courtesy of Shen Yuan. "I don't have any points anymore. And my System is concealing its

knowledge from me. Can you figure out the real identity of the author? From unlocking a hacking skill or something? I need to talk to him."

Mobei-jun is silent as his fingers fly over the keyboard. Suddenly, the very same page Shen Yuan was refreshing during his fever pops up.

PROUD IMMORTAL DEMON WAY

A STORY OF CULTIVATION, HAREMS AND REVENGE.

WHEN A DISCIPLE IS BOUND TO BE SCORNED AND HURT AT EVERY TURN, HE CAN ONLY TAKE IT, SLOWLY POWERING UP HIS DEMON SIDE, BIDING HIS TIME UNTIL HE CAN BRING RETRIBUTION TO HIS ENEMIES.

Luo Binghe didn't even bother reading that slop. A single name was all he needed. "There, Airplane Shooting towards the Sky."

"Mh."

Luo Binghe focuses back on the intricate flavors of the meat bun, trying to figure out which spices are familiar to him, and which flavors are new. No need to hound Mobei-jun while he talks to his System and starts hacking away at the computer. Or, at least, that's what Luo Binghe assumes he's doing.

"..."

"..."

Mh, that's curry. What about those little green bits though? Wonder if I can get just one of them in my mouth. Luo Binghe sticks his tongue out, aiming for a small piece of green garnish.

"Are you reading it? You shouldn't bother. I never did either. Shen Yuan said it's shit. I believe him."

"It's about you."

"Mobei-xiansheng, just because someone's got the same name as someone else, doesn't mean they're the same people. Take your Shang Qinghua. Wasn't there a Peak Lord with that name? And yet the System said it's just us who came from our world into this one."

Mobei-jun doesn't reply. He simply nods towards his screen. Luo Binghe rolls his eyes, pausing his meat bun spice quest. He grabs his phone, not even bothering with the grease stains his fingers are leaving on the screen. He pulls up the first chapter.

Ten minutes later, he's slamming Pen Mo into Mobei-jun's desk, leaving a hole full of ink. He's seeing red.

"Bastard! Whoever this plane is, he'll get the death he deserves! This is *my* life! System! What the *fuck* is going on?!" He growls.

[ERROR. UNEXPECTED VARIABLE. ERROR. ERROR]

Luo Binghe's vision fills with red warnings.

"How did this Airplane, from another world, find out about *my* life and write about it?!"

[ERROR.]

"Answer, wretched beast!"

"It is of no use. My System is refusing to cooperate as well." Mobei-jun hums, as his eyes focus back on the screen. "The last chapter is dated a week before we got here. The following one *should* have been uploaded the night before our arrival, but it never came. This does not point to the author somehow watching our lives from another world."

"Then what—"

"It could be… that we were plucked from this novel and brought here."

"Are you insane?! Our lives were *real!* My suffering, I felt it on my hands, on my body! I am not made of words, my life is not controlled by a puppeteer!!" He throws Pen Mo at the wall beside Mobei-jun's face.

"Mh. It is troubling. I'll try cooperating with my System. But first, we can try finding the author. If he's alive, then he'll have answers."

"Yes, and after he's given them to us, I will rip his limbs one by one and keep him in a nice little cage until he starves to death." He spits, watching Mobei-jun's skills as he opens window after window.

"Shang Qinghua." Mobei-jun's voice shakes, breaking on the last syllable.

"What about him?"

"He's the author."

"Perfect, then call him in right now! The answers we seek are right behind that very door!"

"No."

"What?"

Mobei-jun rises, patting the wrinkles in his suit. "I will not call him. My System is blaring with errors. I cannot physically utter the words to him. It's saying I need a million OP to *jailbreak continuity*. Secondly, my mission relies on keeping Shang Qinghua alive. Telling him we know would immediately send him into shock."

"I do not care—!"

“Then what of *your* mission? Do you believe Shen Yuan’s pathetically fragile heart would handle such news?”

“Pathetically fragile heart?” Luo Binghe growls, stepping forward to grab the collar of the taller man’s expensive suit, glaring at him from above. “Explain yourself.”

“Shen Yuan is meant to die of a heart attack.”

“Why would you not have told me this *as soon* as you found out?!”

Mobei-jun’s expression is the picture of calmness. “I thought you’d gotten the necessary points to figure it out already.”

“You arrogant piece of shit!” He leans closer until their foreheads knock against one another. “I will speak with the little charge of yours, and then dispose of him as I see fit. Do you believe that being a boss in this world makes it so you can *control me*, you vain, condescending—”

The door of Mobei-jun’s slams open. There, stand Shen Yuan in the flesh, and Shang Qinghua, standing behind him, both with equally worried expressions at the sight before them.

art by @dehloosquared on twitter <3

[Shen Yuan’s stress levels increased by 300 points.]

Luo Binghe immediately drops Mobei-jun’s collar and turns around. But he knows Shen Yuan has spotted the murderous intent on his face. Will he ever be able to charm his way around him again? Or is his plan totally and utterly doomed, once more because of the rodent of a man that stands in the doorway?

“B-boss! I apologize! It’s just— there’s some investors outside, and— they look important and— and you told me I never have to knock so— I apologize!”

Luo Binghe can barely stand him. He’s got no clue how Mobei-jun stands to have this pathetic man’s desk in his own office. He moves, almost imperceptibly, ready to drag Shang Qinghua into the office, when Mobei-jun grabs his wrist.

In the time it takes to flick a sleeve, he turns back to glare at Mobei-jun, but out of the corner of his eye, becomes aware of Shen Yuan’s expression. He’s not scared. He’s averting his gaze, lips thinning into an expression of… bitterness, tinged with a faint blush on the tips of his ears.

[Shen Yuan’s romance points decreased by 1.]

[Shen Yuan’s stress levels increased by 20 points.]

Huh?

He’s never seen that expression, and it throws him off-guard. So much so that Mobei-jun manages to beat him. “Leave us. We were discussing a potential raise. Confidential. I should have locked the door. Tell the investors to wait in the break room and make themselves home.”

Shang Qinghua, who has never seen his boss so agreeable, hastily grabs Shen Yuan and closes the door behind him.

“Look at them. The people of this world are weak. Neither would stand discovering that the characters they wrote or read about are actually *real*.”

“...” Luo Binghe grabs Pen Mo off the wall. “Indeed.”

“As for your original goal. Qinghua confessed to me that he stopped writing his novel because the characters *took a turn that he hadn’t expected,* and he hadn’t had any inspiration since. I believe that our deaths were accidental. He had plans for us, but as soon as he wrote them on the page, we were transmigrated here, and he has since been unable to control our actions.”

“Tsk. It does make a lick of sense.”

“Mh. This situation… requires reflection. But we must not tell them.”

Luo Binghe nods. But in his mind, he opens up a little vertical window, titled “*Jailbreak”*, showing his slow progress towards one million OP.

Chapter End Notes

Yes I reuploaded this because I realized the embed DIDNT WORK and I didn't want people to miss on the amazing art by @dehloosquared T_T
Apologies for the extra notification :((I'm a dumbass

Chapter 12: Work Trip

Chapter Summary

In which Luo Binghe discovers the horrors of mandatory work trips. And gachapons.

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains art by the amazing @horobinota on bluesky!

With a mere week's notice, Luo Binghe has to figure out the following: what a work trip is, where to purchase a suitcase (searching up "suitcase store" on Baidu yields no results), what to pack for a work trip, what a "connecting train" is, what the differences are between this world's hotels and his world's inns, and many more points, in a list that runs over the bottom of his vision.

In doing so, he refuses to ask Shen Yuan for help. Nevertheless, during their commutes, the man offers it. Luo Binghe notices how Shen Yuan makes sure to seamlessly drop in the conversation that "hotels these days *never* offer toothbrushes or even slippers, can you believe?" or that one always needs a couple of casual outfits, just in case colleagues offer to go out drinking after work, but the day's suit has to be left at the hotel to protect it from the stench of bars and fried food.

On the morning of their departure, he almost has a nervous breakdown while trying to close the suitcase. He had foolishly believed that the smallest size would be adequate to support a mere three-day trip, but perhaps he was wrong. He hastily takes out his third suit and sets off.

He picks Shen Yuan up, and the man looks awfully refreshed (somehow even more so than those few times they've had fun with those electronic toys at his place). As do the rest of the ten or so odd coworkers they meet at the central station. Luo Binghe had to look away from his own dark circles when he looked at himself in the mirror this morning. Maybe the people of this world *are* stronger than they appear. Of all the things that could have made him change his mind about them, their quick adaptability to situations which require an intricate and secret set of rules was not one of them. And yet, now, he seriously has to reconsider the mental fortitude of those around him.

Without Luo Binghe ever having to pull out the puppy eyes and high-pitched "senior", Shen Yuan takes charge of their expedition, mumbling something about being the one with higher seniority in the group. Luo Binghe, for possibly the first time in this world, allows his brain

to shut off. He simply follows along, Shen Yuan's bony back his only anchor in this strange, meandering, confusing world.

Once more, he's on a train. This one is much broader, with the seats arranged in groups of four around small tables, somewhat resembling his world's carriages.

He sits in front of Shen Yuan and places their luggage strategically so that no one can even think of sitting beside them. He needs Shen Yuan's attentiveness on *him* and him *alone*, as they navigate away from the only place Luo Binghe has known for a couple of months. A rumbling rises from under him, not unlike a carriage along a rocky road, but the difference comes when they start moving. In a couple of seconds, their speed has picked up much more than Luo Binghe has ever felt on natural means of transportation, even his car. In an incense time, their city is completely out of view.

In his previous life, he'd never felt anchored to one place. Except for a few, fleeting years of unyielding hope at Qing Jing Peak, he'd always moved without a care, taken trips without knowing what would befall him, but had never felt uncertain. Leaving this town, on a *train*, he feels only anchored to Shen Yuan, as if his disappearance would spell certain doom for him. His thoughts anxiously return to his apartment, his desk at Zhanwei Fu Publishing Company, Shen Yuan's place.

What.

What is wrong with me?

[Analysis…]

Shut it.

Luo Binghe pinches his palm. He's gotten *soft*. *Complacent.* Instead, he needs to make use of this trip. Plan, scheme, and take every second he can of proximity with Shen Yuan to get OP and improve his health and stress, until those red and blue bars fill the top of his vision.

Pull yourself together, Luo Binghe.

He does not, unfortunately, manage to pull himself together.

At check-in, he's confused about what an ID is. He's got to ask the System, which, as always, is snarky about it.

[Abbreviation for "identification."]

I figured. Now, do I have one?!

[Answer: yes.]

What? Where? What does it look like?!

[Answer: Resident Identity Card. Answer: in the bottom drawer of your desk in your apartment. Answer: A rigid plastic rectangle, about the size of your smartphone.]

The whole time, as he silently argues with the System in his mind, the clerk simply stares at him. He came up right after Shen Yuan, who got there first as per his status as stand-in leader, and thus the rest of the team are also gazing at him, wondering what the fuck is going on. He can feel their gazes on the back of his head, the tapping of the short-haired woman's fingers on her phone, undoubtedly *mocking* him to her friend.

"My apologies for the inconvenience." Shen Yuan steps in. "I assure you, this man is Luo Binghe. His name is on the list. His ID expired three weeks ago and it's taking longer than normal to get a new one. Would you be able to let us through? I'll vouch for him."

When the clerk nods, Shen Yuan's stress levels decrease by ten.

When he notices that he's paired with the guy from finance that he's spoken to a total of five times (despite his efforts to charm everyone in the office, the man is both useless and extremely annoying) he looks to Shen Yuan, silently calculating different ways to switch rooms. Before he can even speak up, Shen Yuan swoops in, babbling about needing to work late with Luo Binghe on an extra project. In conference rooms, all his colleagues are mingling with people from other companies. They talk about books, education, networking, connections, sports, and politics, and Luo Binghe realizes just how big this world is, just how long he's only had eyes for Shen Yuan. While chatting to someone from another company, he mistakes the name of a band heard earlier, with the talk of a strip club going on at that moment, and suggests to a sixty-something man that he take his daughter there. At the man's horrified response, he tries covering it up with a chuckle and pat on the thigh, but for the first time, it doesn't seem to work. What works, is Shen Yuan appearing as if out of thin air and excusing Luo Binghe, talking about a "secluded upbringing." Luo Binghe wonders if somehow, Shen Yuan got a System of his own and is using it to leech off his charisma. Once more, Shen Yuan's stress points decrease.

Why are Shen Yuan's stress points decreasing? I'm putting him in stressful situations. He's having to clean up my messes. He should be glaring at me.

[Answer: Shen Yuan finds fulfillment in guiding user Luo Binghe and having him depend on him.]

Luo Binghe decides to ignore that answer. At dinner with the others, the "western-style" dishes on the menus are a mess of unknown words and concepts. He ends up ordering a mess of meat, tomato sauce, and large noodles, all orderly stacked on one another. His colleagues laugh and snicker as he tries cutting the contraption with chopsticks. It takes Shen Yuan, who ordered the same dish, silently grabbing his fork, for him to get it right.

The following day is not any better. By the time they're back in the hotel, taking off their shoes, Luo Binghe has been irritated for close to thirty hours. His mind is a mess, and, for the first time, he realizes his mistake in hastily taking a suit out of his luggage. During the first day, he stained one with ragù. During the second day, he *stumbled* while bringing coffee to the man he had offended the previous day, and had gotten coffee all over his shirt.

Left with no other choice, he can only pitifully look at Shen Yuan. "Senior… I don't have anything to wear for tomorrow."

“Huh?!”

“I… couldn’t fit three suits in my luggage. I took out my third because I was late.” He sighs. Part of him wonders if Shen Yuan will suddenly turn into Shen Qingqiu, yelling at him and thinking of the best punishment for him.

Instead, the man only sighs. Then, his voice is softer than usual. “C’mon. Grab your other suit.”

“A laundromat?”

Shen Yuan nods, dragging Luo Binghe in by the colorful little places, the only lights in the narrow secondary street. “Mhm. Lifesavers for students in apartments that don’t have washing machines. Open 24/7, never need any staff to function.” Shen Yuan bends down to throw his suit in one of the machines.

Tired, Luo Binghe allows himself to observe the man, as he is. His short hair, his wonky posture, the way his skin glows under the green and orange neon lights. His shirt, always closed up to the very last button, has *two* unbuttoned spots. It is in this particular moment, as Luo Binghe watches this strange man counting coins and swearing about change and broken machines, that he truly understands this is *not* Shen Qingqiu. He’s able to look at Shen Yuan without the shadow of another other man choking him.

“Alright. Done. We’ll have to wait about an hour and a half since this machine does both washing and drying.” He turns back, hands over his hips, half-leaning on the machine. “Actually, you should know, you’re not supposed to do this to nice suits. You’ve been taking them to the dry cleaner’s, right? Anyway, it’s fine if we just do it this one time. I did it like, twenty times before my first suit just… fell apart.”

“Senior.” Luo Binghe’s tone is soft, but he’s not forcing it, for once. He doesn’t think he’s got any energy to force it.

“Mh?”

“Thank you. I am sorry for troubling you.”

Shen Yuan pauses.

[Shen Yuan’s romance points increased by 20.]

“Binghe, you’re not yourself tonight. Come. Since we have to wait, I’ll show you something else.” He doesn’t spare him another glance, but Luo Binghe can see the slightest blush on his face, concern in his eyes.

And, most importantly, under the blue stress point bar, he can finally see a small, almost invisible pink bar. Focusing on it, it pops up a caption that reads “romance points.”

Luo Binghe follows Shen Yuan, who walks with his chin raised up. Luo Binghe could, *should* question him. A tongue-in-cheek question about when he was in this city, if he grew up here, or if he regularly takes day trips here when he's got the time. But he doesn't.

He doesn't speak during the short walk until they arrive at a white-neon room whose light pools in the otherwise dark street. Inside, are a series of strange machines, which go up from the floor for a couple of meters.

"Gachapons."

"Huh?"

"They're called gachapons." Shen Yuan points to the machines. His brow is less furrowed than usual. He's in his element. "You get some money in here, and you get one or more of these tokens. Then, you select the machine you like, put the token in, and a big ball comes out… I'll just show you."

Soon after, Shen Yuan has spent the amount of money needed for about ten meat buns and has a handful of pink coins that are not coins, because they're flat and have a big "X" drawn on them.

"So, each machine here has cute stuff inside. Most are keychains. But some are magnets, small figures, or other weird stuff. On the display, you can see all the different options. Walk around, see what catches your eye. Choosing the perfect machine and your target is part of the process. We're lucky that it's so late, by the way. These places are usually packed with snotty teenagers at all times."

Shen Yuan doesn't even let him ask any questions. Before Luo Binghe can connect the dots, the man has already walked deeper into the labyrinth and is studying the machines, making different weird sounds of surprise, disdain, and delight.

The only thing he can do, then, is imitate him. Perhaps the System is right. He really is dependent on Shen Yuan.

He walks, trying to see if any design catches his eye. Every machine has different themes. He reads them all, not wanting to disappoint his seniors."Trains," "Happy Shitty Life," "Mofusand Cats," "Omniscient Reader's Viewpoint," "Ramen Wolf & Curry Tiger" (he likes this one, with a fat wolf and muscular tiger snuggling up in front of a bowl of ramen in the rare keychain), "Ice Guy & Cool Girl," "HATSUNE MIKU AND FRIENDS," "Little Mushroom."

The last one makes him pause. The keychains here seem to feature a gun, a bullet, a soft-looking man, a stern man clad in black, a city skyline, and then on the "rare" slot, a blob-like, sitting figure. It's barely got any features, but slightly resembles the soft-looking man. It looks like it's floating, and it's only one color: a beautiful, pale green. "An Zhe's spore."

He doesn't know who or what An Zhe is. But he does know that green. It's the green of Shen Yuan's eyes. Of Shen Qingqiu's eyes. And of his jade Guanyin.

What… what happened to my jade Guanyin?

"Do you like that one?" Shen Yuan pops from behind him. "Little Mushroom… I've heard decent stuff about it. Might give it a read. So, do you already know what your *chase* is? It means the one you want."

I want my jade Guanyin…

Luo Binghe's eyes are blinded by the white lights. They buzz in the silent night, impossibly loud. He can barely raise his finger, pointing towards "An Zhe's spore."

"The rare?! It is pretty… but… You never know, with these scumbags, what rate they'll put. But then, sometimes your chase is the basic, and you get like, three super rares before getting the one you want. The opposite of manifestation."

Shen Yuan rambles, and he places the first token in a slit. He turns on a little handle, and finally, the plastic ball drops in a chute. His noble hands quickly bring it in front of Luo Binghe and pop it open.

"Shit, the gun. Literally the worst one. It's always like that. Eugh, and look at this quality. Shitty plastic, for a high-end gachapon store. Grinds my fucking gears. You wanna try for the second one?"

Where is my jade Guanyin?

"Mh."

Shen Yuan raises a hand, towards Luo Binghe's own. Whether from doubt, indecisiveness, or something else, he drops it before touching him. "Okay. Then your senior will win it for you."

Luo Binghe quickly loses count of the number of tries. The rhythmic noise of the metal token dropping in the machine, the rumble of the handle as it turns, the dull *plop* of the plastic ball dropping, then the *phwa* as it's popped open, and lastly, Shen Yuan's swearing, repeat over and over, unchanging.

Did I have it in my robes? Where… when…

Shen Yuan trots back over the token machine, then trots back with twice as many tokens as before. "These bastards…"

No… I lost it. When that bastard Ming Fan strung me up to a bamboo tree and beat me. I couldn't find it then. I vowed I'd get it back from him. I vowed I'd feed him alive to a swarm of ants. But now… Where…

Between grumbles, he tries again and again and again, until only one ball is left in the machine. "Assholes! Did they really only put *one* per machine? That's the most scumbag tactic. Let's just hope that no one else got it before us…"

Clink, fhrup, plop, phwa.

“Yess!!!” Shen Yuan beams, shoving the little green figure in Luo Binghe’s face. “We got it! It’s yours! Last one, can you believe it! Aha! Now, I don’t wanna think about how much money I put in or how many keychains I’ve got, but—”

Luo Binghe’s hand reaches out before he can stop it. He snatches the small figure, rubbing his thumb over its delicate body. “I…” The words rise up in his chest but get stuck right in the middle of his throat. “Thank… Thank you, Shen Yuan.” He whispers, barely audible, voice breaking on the other man’s name.

[Shen Yuan’s romance points increased by 50.]

art by @horobinota on bluesky <3

By the next day, Luo Binghe seems to have returned to his normal self. Much to Shen Yuan’s disappointment, since he’s the prime target of his teasing. But he can’t help his heart

softening, each time that he catches Luo Binghe's hand, hidden in his pocket, rubbing the keychain.

Shen Yuan keeps a "Lu Feng", the stern-looking man, and gives the others away. By the following Monday, everyone in the office dons an extra little keychain on their bags. Luo Binghe's is already slightly worn out over the ridges, where his thumb rubs it, over and over.

Chapter 13: Pillow Talk

Chapter Summary

In which Luo Binghe tries his best to get an axious Shen Yuan to unwind.

Luo Binghe had never been in a top-grade disastrous work meeting before. When everyone's all gathered in their dusty conference room, graced by a visit from their elusive higher-ups, he can only watch as they scream at them all, one by one. The System's warnings about not having any lives left are somehow fresh in his mind.

He just takes it, but he doesn't miss the barely contained rage in Shen Yuan's eyes as the bosses yell at him. He can tell he wants to bite back. And he does. With surprising fierceness, the passive, grumpy Shen Yuan *actually* talks back to their bosses. No insults, nothing that could get him fired, but enough that everyone else is sent out of the room so that they can dig into him personally. Luo Binghe is the last to leave, sending a concerned look at the man.

The only thing he can think to do to fix the day, after he sees Shen Yuan's shoulders even more curved than usual, is text: "can icomeover 2night."

Luo Binghe usually never touches Shen Yuan during their *toy time.* But today, he can tell Shen Yuan needs a bit of extra loving. So he lets him clean up while he sets up the room, a double-dildo suctioned on the floor, a "Snake-clan man takes you and puts eggs in you" audio CD slotted in the PC, and copious amounts of lube on *everything.*

By the time Shen Yuan gets in the room, Luo Binghe has already worked himself on one end of the double dildo. The smaller one. It *was* a hit to his ego, for a moment, to admit that Shen Yuan was much more proficient than him. Only for a moment.

He watches as Shen Yuan kneels on the floor, where Luo Binghe has placed two soft pillows to protect the man's frail knees. They're *so* close to one another, different body parts brushing against each other as they move. Even a simple touch of their forearms feels overwhelmingly tender. Not to mention the ten-point increase in romance when Luo Binghe gently places the more comfortable set of headphones on Shen Yuan's ears. He tries to erase the word *"depend"* from his mind.

He presses play on the audio, watching as Shen Yuan gets in character, swaying as if moved by gentle waves. He's trying hard to stay focused on the fantasy, to keep his breathing in check, Luo Binghe can tell. So, he helps. As the scene starts, he decides to embody the role of the speaker, something he's often thought about but never *actually* done. It would have made those encounters feel a little too real. A little too similar to the ones he had in his home world.

But now, it feels different. Grabbing Shen Yuan's hips, grazing his fingertips over those milky thighs, guiding his hips, pulling and pushing on the cock. He's even rough, at times, when the "snake-man" is. He leaves no room for Shen Yuan to get used to the pace, to control his movements like he usually does. At one point, Luo Binghe even hops off the dildo, his own pleasure forgotten as he focuses *all* his attention on keeping Shen Yuan's attention.

It doesn't take long for Shen Yuan to finish (to his displeasure, since he's started trying to last until the POV of the audio comes). As soon as they're done, without bothering to take care of himself, Luo Binghe, still hard, gently places one arm under Shen Yuan's buttocks, lifting him off the dildo slowly, and setting him on the bed. By now, he knows where the towels are, where to place the headphones once they're done using them, and how to clean the dildos and properly store them in their boxes.

Shen Yuan catches his breath, gazing at the busy Luo Binghe.

[Shen Yuan's stress points decreased by 300.]

[Shen Yuan's romance points increased by 100.]

"I can get to it tomorrow, Binghe." He whispers.

Luo Binghe doesn't even turn around to reply to him. "No need."

"You didn't come."

"I satisfied my urges in pleasing my senior." Luo Binghe knows his semi-hard cock doesn't really make him believable. Shen Yuan doesn't seem to mind, right now.

"Come to bed." There's a surprising firmness to those three words, even through a haze of exhaustion.

Luo Binghe almost drops the paper towel roll he's using to clean the dildo. He's never spent the night. "What?"

"Come to bed. It's just a hassle for you to get home, clean up, and then get back here to pick me up in the morning. Just sleep here."

A knot comes undone in Luo Binghe's chest. He smiles, slapping the light switch off, and prowls towards the bed. His arms are around Shen Yuan, placing him in a perfect spooning position.

"I said to come to bed to sleep! I never allowed you to *cuddle*!" Shen Yuan whisper-shouts.

"Cuddles improve trust and reduce stress. I think it's perfect for two coworkers like us, no?"

"Shameless!" Shen Yuan grumbles, but he nonetheless lays his head back down on the pillow, allowing Luo Binghe to stay close. His long hair sprawls over the both of them underneath the blankets, sending tingles up their naked bodies. They've never shared warmth like this, never had so much skin-to-skin. It's a warmth so different from the kinds Luo Binghe has experienced before, and entirely alien to Shen Yuan.

Which might be why the man's body is still so tense.

[Shen Yuan's stress points increased by 10.]

The low number barely registers. Just normal ups and downs.

[Shen Yuan's stress points increased by 20.]

[Shen Yuan's stress points increased by 10.]

[Shen Yuan's stress points increased by 3.]

[Shen Yuan's stress points increased by 5.]

Huh?

Luo Binghe snakes one hand over Shen Yuan's torso, resting it over his fragile heart. It's beating fast, hard. Too much for two people cuddling in peace.

"Senior, your heart is beating out of your chest."

"Do not call me senior while you're half-naked in my bed. And I'm fully naked." He grumbles. "I… I've just… Hell, I was thinking about today's meeting."

"Right now?"

"Mh." Shen Yuan simply hums. Luo Binghe has half a mind to strangle him.

"It's… You can't do that, a-Yuan."

Shen Yuan's eye twitches at the prefix.

"I can't help it. Don't you ever think back to your day while in bed? Living all your mistakes over and over again like a cruel playlist?"

Lu Binghe makes a literal mental note to look up what a *playlist* is. "I do not."

Shen Yuan's eye twitches. "Tsk. It's infuriating, you know? All the ways in which—"

He never finishes the sentence. The words die in the dark room, under warm covers, from a strike of Luo Binghe's lips on his own. It's a chaste kiss, definitely not what Shen Yuan would have expected of him. A mere second and the warmth pulls back, a stifled whimper following it. A smirk, for a fraction of a second, those obsidian black eyes glinting in the dark, and then he's softly pressing onto him again.

Luo Binghe's hand gently but firmly guides his chin, his gentle lips the polar opposite of his earlier firmness, its marks still visible on Shen Yuan's legs. The kisses are slow and never deep, with Luo Binghe dipping in and out, occasionally exploring Shen Yuan's cheeks and jaw. All sense of time is lost in the quiet night, broken up only by soft gasps, and the sound of hands gliding over naked skin.

Everything becomes a blur, and Shen Yuan barely even registers that they've stopped kissing, that his head is snugly nestled in the crook of Luo Binghe's neck as if he were a soft maiden, and that Luo Binghe's lips rest comfortably on the crown of his head.

"I used to read the light novel I told you about, Proud Immortal Demon Way, at night, to de-stress. It's kinda stupid, looking back, realizing that it never really de-stressed me. Quite the opposite. But… it became my routine way too quickly. And now that it's gone… my nights feel hollow, as if something is missing. And I can't help but feel pathetic, because I know I'm getting the best sleep of my life, improving my health and all that shit. Some nights, I lie awake, refreshing those pages obsessively, waiting for an update, rereading old chapters, until my eyes are basically closing on their own. Then I realize it's bad for me. I put little locks on my phone so that I can't use my browser for more than a certain amount of time. I get locked out. I put my phone down. And then three minutes later I pick it back up and undo the lock. Until I forget about all my problems and the only thing that fills my mind is a stupid stallion novel." He whispers. He doesn't even know if Luo Binghe is awake. "It's the following mornings that I, for some reason, feel so extraordinarily ashamed of myself, and buy meat buns for the both of us."

He shuts his eyes, burrowing deeper into Luo Binghe's body. "Nights like these, while my mind goes over and over the events of a shitty thing that happened during the day, I so desperately crave a new chapter, crave leaving a comment on it, bickering with the author and other readers, calling them dumb until I pass out, and *I* feel so dumb because of it." His breath hitches. "Especially because… I almost lost my sense of time, I was in a haze. Every day, going to work, then reading light novels and rereading Proud Immortal Demon Way until I passed out. Again, and again. It felt as if everyone's lives were moving forward, while I was submerged in water, watching them. So why… why is it that *now* is when I feel stuck? When the story's not updating, when I'm mostly going to bed at a sane time?"

Suddenly, he grips onto Luo Binghe's body like it's his anchor. Luo Binghe squeezes him right back.

Something peculiar happens in Luo Binghe's mind. Whereas he'd normally, passively, try to come up with the best answer to get what he wants out of Shen Yuan (in this case, keep him alive), he comes up blank. Maybe there's no blood left in his brain. Without realizing it fully, in a half-asleep daze, he does something he hasn't done in who knows how long. Luo Binghe allows himself to speak without thinking. "I do not know, a-Yuan. But I know that… that I'm glad you told someone like me. I'm glad I can feel your heart slowing down. And I can help it slow down until you figure it out."

He knows it's not the best response. The usually loud part of his brain, now awfully quiet, is just barely whispering, out of frame, telling him what a shitty response that was, that Shen Yuan will think he didn't listen at all even though he *really* did. That he's fucked it up.

But Shen Yuan just scoffs. Luo Binghe knows that scoff only serves to hide a small smile. "What did I do to deserve such a devoted junior?"

"Do not call me junior when we're half-naked in the same bed." He leans down and presses a soft kiss on Shen Yuan's forehead. "Go to sleep."

Shen Yuan obeys.

Chapter 14: Shizun

Chapter Summary

In which everything goes horribly wrong, in a storage closet.

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains art by the amazing @dehloosquared on twitter!!

[Commencing trope #07: Deus Ex Machina]

Luo Binghe's focus has started slipping. The way to one million OP seems impossibly long. He knows Shen Yuan's stress level fluctuations cannot truly be fixed until he gets closure about the novel that clearly played a huge role in his life. And yet such a conversation cannot happen as long as Mobei-jun is watching over Shang Qinghua like a hawk. Quite literally, since he permanently moved Qinghua's desk in his office. It grinds Luo Binghe's gears. Does the man not want answers about his own nature? About the link between their lives and this novel? About their original world? About why their Systems are being so cagey about this?

Going fully on autopilot, Luo Binghe remembers Qin-nushi asking for a refill of paper in the printer, citing that it was stored in the "creepy storage room."

Might as well get to it, he thinks, passing by all the desks of the small office, past the break room, and into a ridiculously small corridor where three rooms are indicated with sharpie on paper tape, by "archive", "legal" (an office that's been vacant for months), and finally, "storage." Zhanwei Fu Publishing Company never goes to events or conventions, thus never has any tape or extra goodies. All their books are shipped directly from the manufacturer to different stores and retailers, so they have a mere three cardboard boxes of older volumes inside their offices. One *could* ask how, in its scarceness, the room still manages to be a disorganized mess. Why are a handful of pens just… scattered in an otherwise empty cardboard box? When was the last time someone entered this room? A thick layer of dust rests on every surface, invading Luo Binghe's lungs.

Then, footsteps behind him. They feel menacing, *wrong.* Because no one should willingly want to enter such a space. Which is why it's likely someone who noticed the door being ajar and came to investigate. He doesn't bother turning around to greet the intruder.

"I'm just looking for some copy paper. Do you know—"

“Eep!”

The yelp is Luo Binghe’s only reply. As he turns, he spots Shen Yuan, clearly spooked by Luo Binghe’s half-hidden figure in the dark, who jumps, letting go of the door’s handle. The treacherous door closes behind him, with the frightening *click* of a lock.

The air suddenly feels heavy with dust, the darkness all-encompassing.

“Shit!” Shen Yuan immediately turns around, using all of his weight to push on the door, twisting the handle desperately back and forth.

“Do you have your phone with you, senior?”

“No! I came over because Qin-nushi was looking for copy paper. Do you?”

“I don’t.” With annoyed resignation, Luo Binghe rips a piece of cardboard box and grabs a discarded pen. Patting around, he tries his best to write *“Unlock, we’re stuck inside”,* and slides it underneath the door. “Someone’s bound to pass by here. Shang Qinghua is always trotting back and forth from the archive. Heavens know what he’s doing, since there’s only three documents in there.”

Luo Binghe slumps back on the wall, barely registering, barely *caring* that his suit on the more expensive side will get caked in dust. He *assumes* he could easily open the door. He didn’t spend 1000 OP to fully unlock a lockpicking skill tree for nothing. But he stays put. He can’t be bothered right now. And besides, all the novels he reads use the “stuck together” trope for important plot developments. Or porn. Maybe that’s what they need right now.

“Just wait?” Shen Yuan asks, inquisitively.

“Mh.”

Shen Yuan moves to stand in front of him. Luo Binghe barely registers the shape of his legs, in the dark. “*You.* Wanting to simply *wait.*”

“What else can we do? Scream? Spare me embarrassment. Plus, this building’s walls are too thick, and all our colleagues care so little about their work that they’re all listening to music or audiobooks while working.”

“That’s something *I* would say.”

Luo Binghe smirks. “What can I say, senior? You’re rubbing on me.”

Shen Yuan finally sits behind him. “I’m not supposed to rub *that* kinda stuff on you.” He grumbles, before turning to Luo Binghe. “What’s going on with you lately?”

[Shen Yuan's stress levels increased by 5 points.]

Luo Binghe looks for the plastic jade keychain that always lives in his pocket. He only finds smooth fabric and stitching. *Shit*.

“What are you referring to, senior?”

“You space out. You glare at Shang Qinghua and Mobei-xiansheng. I do not presume to know what kind of relationship lies between the two of you, but…”

“Relationship?” Luo Binghe’s ears perk up.

“That… well, that was certainly the impression I got when I saw the two of you arguing in his office. One doesn’t simply *yell* at their boss, let alone whilst being so close, grabbing his collar and all that jazz. Plus, you came out and there were *no* consequences. No extra work. No pay cut. Nothing. Logically, that means the argument was of a more personal nature.”

I want to tell you. I want to tell you everything and be rid of this fucking nightmare.

[Jailbreak attempt: ERROR. To unlock “Jailbreak”, please accumulate the necessary funds of one million OP.]

Bullshit. You think you can force me? Control my body for me? You think that I, Luo Binghe, destined to rise up to the Heavens after touching the bottom of the Endless Abyss, lack the willpower to simply speak?

“You *are* perceptive, senior, I actually—” His saliva goes down the wrong pipe. He coughs, wheezing as he tries to catch his breath. Thinking of all the breathing exercises he did, endlessly, over and over, in his cultivation training, he forces his lungs to *cooperate.*

[Shen Yuan's stress levels increased by 100 points.]

“Are you okay?!” Shen Yuan’s hand navigates in the dark, looking for Luo Binghe’s back, firmly patting on it. “It’s this damn storage room. There’s more dust than air. Have you ever had problems with asthma or something?”

“No, senior. I’m fine, I just—” His heart stops for a second, beating irregularly and knocking the air out of his lungs once more. He coughs, hand going up to his chest.

[ERROR. DO NOT ATTEMPT TO JAILBREAK. ERROR.]

[PUNISHMENT MODULE WILL BE INITIATED IF USER LUO BINGHE CONTINUES TO STRUGGLE.]

Punishment module? You try to threaten me? I will not bow. My story has never been about bowing. You would do well to remember that.

He pushes himself, punching on his chest to get his heart sorted.

[Private service announcement: punishment module is inescapable. Available options include: living Shen Yuan’s death in first person, living Shang Qinghua’s death in first person, re-living endless nights in the Abyss, re-living endless days in the wooden shed.]

Shen Yuan fishes an extra desk lamp from one of the cardboard boxes, and plugs it on the walls. He points it towards Luo Binghe, illuminating the room.

Those clear pools of jade are wholly focused on him, pupils dilating and restricting at the change in light.

“Shen Yuan, I—” This time, his tongue feels stuck on the word, like those stuttering idiots.

[Initiating punishing module. Rolling for scenario.]

Luo Binghe leans forward, feeling his body as it grows more and more stiff, and no amount of willpower, of closing his eyes and seizing control of his limbs working. “Shen Yuan.”

[Shen Yuan's stress levels increased by 10.000 points.]

“Binghe! Focus on breathing!” Shen Yuan’s eyes are wide open, his arms suddenly supporting Luo Binghe around the shoulders. “Help! Someone, *help*! There’s a medical emergency!”

Luo Binghe growls, before his tongue goes completely slack. Suddenly, the shitty, dusty tiled floor becomes a sight he knows too well. Wooden planks, broken down and rotten, grass and dirt breaking through in between them. His hands seem smaller, and Ming Fan’s wretchedly high-pitched voice is spouting some nonsense he can barely hear. As the two worlds blur together, not even closing his eyes can help him escape the nightmare. The System is forcing them open. They sting as they dry, and yet even with all his strength, they refuse to close.

I yield.

The System does not reply, but the floor does seem to switch back and forth between tile and wood. Ming Fan’s voice glitches with Shen Yuan’s, and Luo Binghe’s not even sure if it’s Shen Yuan or Shen Qingqiu talking.

His fingers dig in his pocket. The jade keychain isn’t there. *Where is it? Where?*

“Binghe? What are you doing?”

Whose voice is this? Shen Yuan? Is he in front of me?

“Breathe! Breathe! Focus!”

Shen Yuan…

With the last of his strength, he slumps forward, curling up into a ball in the warm figure in front of him.

His mind clears, mostly. Ming Fan is not threatening or goading him. He’s in a shitty, dusty storage closet, and Shen Yuan’s focus is wholly, fully, entirely on him.

“Are you okay?! Breathe. Breathe!”

Luo Binghe turns off the UI in his vision. It’s not enough to stop the way his brain is jumping from thought to thought, from memory to memory, unwilling to stop. He can only get his

vision under control, breath finally pooling in his lungs for a few seconds, and then out again for a few more.

“What was that? Asthma? Is it the dust?”

“No.” Luo Binghe croaks, his voice finally following his command. “No, it’s— it’s stress.”

Heavens. When was the last time I stuttered? Pathetic. Pathetic. Pathetic.

“Stress? Whatever for? What happened that made you have such a reaction?”

I cannot tell you. I cannot tell you. I cannot tell you. Where is my jade Guanyin?

The words spill freely from his lips. “I… I feel stuck in this work, in this body. I cannot do or say what I want, and I feel my body deteriorating by this lifestyle, and our boss controls our bodies and my *very mind* and I never have time to stop and *think* and everything around here is strange and—”

“You’re crying.”

“I’m crying.”

They note in unison. Luo Binghe’s hands go up to his cheeks. The tears are cold. When was the last time he cried? Was it during his fall into the Abyss? After looking into his shizun’s eyes and seeing nothing but contempt, as the very last shred of hope left his body?

There’s no rage. He looks deep inside him, in the stomach where the green, acid emotion should pool, and finds none. He’s sobbing. His childish, broken sobs fill the room, his snot falls on Shen Yuan’s shirt, and he cannot stop any of it.

“I— I just want— I want someone to help— to *know* me. No one knows me here. No one. So who am I now? Who have I become since I crossed the threshold of this damned company? Why— Why did— Why—”

Shen Yuan’s arms envelop him. They don’t squeeze him anxiously, rather they loosely hold him. A slender hand strokes his back, up and down, slowly, soothing, with surprising grace.

art by @dehloosquared on twitter <3

“Binghe…” Shen Yuan whispers, a maternal sweetness tinging his words. “You cannot bottle up such things for so long.”

His sobbing gets louder. Heavens, why does he have to channel all his poise and maturity *right now? Cruel. Cruel. Cruel. This is what I’ve always wanted.*

A thumb gently caresses his tears. “You’ve done well, acclimating to a new environment. It’s tough for everyone, yet you did it with such ease.”

Luo Binghe isn’t sure if those words are real. They don't sound like Shen Yuan at all. He doesn’t indulge him like this. His brow isn’t furrowed and he isn’t scowling or grumbling about foolishness.

This is what I’ve always needed.

“Shh, shh,” Shen Yuan coos. “It’s like you told me last night. I’ll be by your side until you figure it out. It’s my duty to help you in this new environment.”

This is all I’ve ever needed.

“Shizun…” Luo Binghe sobs weakly, all the energy leaving his body.

[ERROR.]

[ERROR.]

“Huh? What did you just say?” Shen Yuan freezes for a moment. His hand trembles, and, thinking he’s about to go insane, he tentatively, gently, swipes his thumb on Luo Binghe’s forehead, in between those perfect chestnut loose curls. Looking for a mark. Of course, there is none.

[ERROR.]

Then, a crash.

[ERROR.]

Mobei-jun’s kick effortlessly destroys the plasterboard door. It seems strange now, that Shen Yuan’s whole body hadn’t managed to dent it, and that no one had managed to hear his screaming through the thin material.

Their boss wears a demonic expression, oozing murderous intent. Shen Yuan tries shielding Luo Binghe with his body.

“Shizun…” He sobs.

[ERROR.]

A hand yanks at his collar, and before he knows it, he’s being thrown over the tall man’s shoulder, and into the “legal department” room.

Holy shit, there’s actually a guy in there.

The icy man doesn’t even have to utter the word “out” for the employee, scared shitless, to skitter out.

Luo Binghe is slammed on the rotating chair, face still a mask of sorrow. One hand reaches towards the storage room, the other scratches at the seams where the jade keychain should be.

“I cannot allow you to be near Shen Yuan.” Mobei-jun growls.

Chapter 15: Third act break-up montage

Chapter Summary

In which we switch to Shen Yuan's POV (gasp).

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It takes less than a working week for Shen Yuan to almost have a mental breakdown at the distance between him and his junior. Mobei-jun moved Luo Binghe's desk to the other side of the office. He's stopped coming to pick him up in the mornings. Stopped bringing him those *delicious* homemade lunches. His life would be in shambles, if not for the fact that, somehow, the habits Luo Binghe forced on his lifestyle have somewhat stuck. He's *actually* hungry at lunchtime and starts going to the cafeteria to eat. His body adapts quickly to waking up slightly earlier to get public transport. What he *cannot* possibly adapt to, is Luo Binghe refusing to meet his gaze, the way his eyes look like heartbreaking pools of guilt. It's like their boss has *forbidden* him from getting close to Shen Yuan.

Now, he never thought he'd work for his whole life at Zhanwei Fu Publishing Company. He wouldn't mind taking a crack at yelling at that pale-as-a-cadaver man, but he can't. Not if it would put Luo Binghe in a compromising position. The youngling is at his first job after university, only a few months in. If he were to be fired, Shen Yuan thinks, a mere few months' worth of work experience on a resume would be incredibly hard to explain to potential employers.

No, then. Better to try to talk things out with the man himself, he thinks while stirring his steaming cup of coffee. It seems that Luo Binghe, even while forbidden from speaking to him, finds the courage to sneakily go to the break room and prepare a pot of coffee two minutes before Shen Yuan's usual break time.

Then, this cup will bring them together again.

Luo Binghe freezes in his tracks when he's walking up the corridor on his way to make some copies of a cover proof, and he sees Shen Yuan in his path.

Shit. He thought he'd calculated it perfectly. He was supposed to still be taking his coffee break. So why is he *here*, in front of him?! Wait, he's still got his cup in hand. But he's looking at him with such… mischievousness. It looks weirdly out of place on his expression.

As they step closer, and closer, and closer, Luo Binghe realizes what the other man is about to do. And he's not about to let it stop, even though he really should. He should avoid every interaction with Shen Yuan until he *knows* he won't fuck it up. But his feet don't cooperate.

He doesn't move, as Shen Yuan does a pathetic little act of tripping on his own feet, and spills a tiny bit of coffee on Luo Binghe.

"Oh Lord! I apologize for my clumsiness, comrade!"

Do not innocently call me comrade when you've made me cum before, asshole.

"I will take you to the bathroom! So we can clean up this spill before it dries! Which is important as I do not wish to ruin this expensive shirt!"

Shen Yuan is enunciating every sentence. Yet no one in the office is even sparing a glance at them. Luo Binghe lets himself be led to the bathroom by Shen Yuan's timid tugging on his sleeve. Just then, a fire is lit in his chest. Even if he cannot tell Shen Yuan the whole truth, even if it takes a decade to get a million OP, why can he not enjoy what is in front of him right now? He's tried to avert his thoughts from that moment in the storage room (failing miserably, especially at night), but he seriously can't help it while Shen Yuan ushers over him like a mother hen, dabbing a paper towel on the coffee stain.

Guilt still gnaws at him, and embarrassment at all the shit he let out during those five minutes, most of which he still can't believe came from his mouth.

But… looking down at Shen Yuan, those long, pitch-black eyelashes and trembling fingertips, he… he has an unbearable urge to tease him while being coddled by him.

"What a clumsy senior." He coos.

Shen Yuan immediately looks up, the smallest gasp escaping his lips. His eyes light up with joy, presumably at seeing Luo Binghe back to his usual self. Only after a couple of seconds of gazing at him with wonder, does he remember what he's supposed to be acting like. He averts his gaze, lips pursed in a pout. "Arrogant little…"

Luo Binghe turns the UI and updates back up, ready to face the consequences of his failures. He's surprised to find that the health bar is more than three-quarters full, and the stress bar is pushing over half, even after the ten-thousand deduction. The pink romance bar, unrelenting, has hit about a third of the total length.

"The stain is still there, senior." He smiles sardonically, pointing at a minuscule coffee stain.

"Tch. Then stay still."

"There's another one right below it."

"That one's not from coffee! Don't try to make me clean stains *you* made!"

"Heh, my senior is too sharp." Luo Binghe pokes at Shen Yuan's stomach. In response, the other man tosses the wet paper towel back in the sink and takes a step back.

"If you're not gonna let me work—"

“No, I’m sorry.” Luo Binghe immediately interrupts him, hiding his hands behind his back. “Sorry, senior. I appreciate your help.”

[Shen Yuan’s romance points increased by 100.]

The words *“you depend on him”* echo around his mind. He decides to ignore them.

Shen Yuan goes back to cleaning up the stains, even getting to the lower one. He whispers. “Why did Mobei-xiansheng move your desk? Are you not my supervisor anymore? If so, why?”

Luo Binghe pauses. He’s got his script ready for this moment. “Our boss thought we were getting up to nasty lovin’ in the storage room. He wanted to avoid an HR disaster.” Just uttering those two letters sends a shiver down his spine. “I’ve convinced him that it wasn’t like that. But he still wanted to punish me. Which is why I get a week of detention in the smelly part of the office. I took the fall for you, senior, you know? I think I deserve a reward.”

If Shen Yuan clocks the lie, he doesn’t mention it. “You deserve any punishment our boss imparts on you. I was simply asking for clarification, as these changes are usually accompanied by a *formal* notice.” He gazes at Luo Binghe’s face. “Does this mean you’ll be back next to me on Monday?” He whispers, so, so quiet.

“So you *do* miss me.”

[Shen Yuan’s romance points increased by 50.]

“Get this clean yourself!”

Luo Binghe chuckles as Shen Yuan storms out.

Soon after, things get back to normal. From that same Monday, he’s back next to him on the desk, handmade lunch in hand, wrapped up in a new handkerchief with bright red hearts over a pink background print.

They never mention the incident in the storage room. But, slowly, Luo Binghe’s things move into Shen Yuan’s place. And at night, Shen Yuan holds him loosely, gracefully caressing his back.

Chapter End Notes

just now noticed that my html editor did not add the line breaks i had in my google doc.... T_T
as a result, going back, i realize a lot of "scene breaks" were not really clear. i apologize!!! T_T i went back and edited everything, be sure that the following chapters will have proper breaks

Chapter 16: Airplane and Cucumber

Chapter Summary

In which we take a small break from Luo Binghe

Having Luo Binghe constantly attached to one's hip, unsurprisingly, proves both stressful and rewarding. He switches from being his usual wide-eyed, innocent self (although with much more sincerity, and Shen Yuan deduces that his earlier behaviors might as well have been an act), and a possessive, obsessive attitude towards him. He often questions Shen Yuan about his involvement with Shang Qinghua, and is never satisfied by the answer of "we were just randomly assigned as deskmates and chatted about light novels from time to time." Luo Binghe has not stopped looking at the man with murderous intent every time they pass him by in the office. As if he doesn't have enough on his mind, with the way Mobei-xiansheng constantly mistreats him. Since he became their boss, Shen Yuan has never seen Shang Qinghua in a relaxed state, not trembling or stuttering or looking at all possible escape routes in the office. He's sure he's even spotted a few bruises on the man, some that *decidedly* looked like handprints on his neck. What the fuck is the HR department even doing, he wonders. Although, this might be a matter for the police directly, at this point.

During a rare lunch apart from Luo Binghe (who got called to a meeting with the higher-ups), Shen Yuan is nibbling on homemade noodles, savoring their taste. His eyes are focusing on a deranged text from Luo Binghe (which reads "let me suckle on them like a newborn calf tonight") when Shang Qinghua appears behind him.

"Jeez. Sexting at work? Does he not have any sense of shame?" He chuckles, slouching on the empty chair next to Shen Yuan, whose eyelid twitches at someone being in Luo Binghe's place.

"I'd be more concerned with your tendency to snoop on others during their break."

"What? Your phone was waaaay out, bro—"

"And of *your own situation.*"

Shang Qinghua stops for a moment. His bushy, auburn eyebrow shoots up. "Speak your mind, Shen Yuan."

"You let the man who works closest to you use and abuse you. It's concerning and pitiful to see, the way you bow and tremble in front of the man. One should truly have better standards for the people they allow into their lives."

“Hah?! First of all, I didn’t *allow* Mobei-jun into my life. He’s my boss and he *made* me his secretary—”

“Didn’t you tell me you had a side business that was making ‘hella money’?” Shen Yuan slams his phone (with more force than he originally intended) face-down on the desk, the vulgar message disappearing from sight. “By now, you should have enough to last a few months, maybe even a year, if you were to leave this job. Even if you choose to stay, why not talk to HR? Or the legal department?”

“Wait, we actually have a legal department?”

“Yeah, apparently.” Shen Yuan shrugs. “Saw a guy in there a few weeks back.”

“Huh.”

“Yeah.”

“Anyways! That man is *scary*! Told me he’d hunt me to the ends of the earth if I even *thought* about leaving. And the way he looks at me, I actually believe it, you know?”

Shen Yuan scoffs. “You’ve always been stuck in your head with those foolish fantasies of yours. That isn’t a man with superpowers. That’s a boss on a power trip. Stand up for yourself, or die and donate your bone marrow, since you’re not using your spine either way.”

“Shen Yuan! That scary Luo Binghe is rubbing off on you! How dare you say such things to your work bestie!”

Shen Yuan sets his chopsticks down, understanding that there’s no way to salvage this lunch into a normal, relaxing one. “First of all, Luo Binghe isn’t scary.”

“He *so* is! I swear his eyes glow red when he looks at me!”

“Delusional. You’re delusional. And second of all, you’re not my work bestie. We talked about webnovels a handful of times while our desks were close together.”

“Yeah, which was for like, five years! Even by only chatting every once in a while, that shit adds up! Which is why I’m so *wounded* that you wouldn’t even consider checking up on me *once* since I got moved to Mobei’s office.”

Mobei? Just Mobei?

“I did. I texted you. I got an automatic reply saying you blocked me.”

“What?! That’s Luo Binghe’s doing for sure!”

“Are you serious?” Shen Yuan glares. “Luo Binghe would not stoop so low as to do such things.” He pauses for a second. *Shit. Maybe he would.* “What would he have gained from that, a mere two days after moving into the office? In a world of back-handed and deceitful people, he’ll tell you that he hates you right to your face. At the very least, he would have told *me* he was doing such a thing.”

A pang of deja-vu crosses Shang Qinghua's mind. He ignores it. "Bro, don't you think you have a veil of bias towards your junior? That's some hardcore defending you're doing."

"It seems to me that *you're* putting forward every excuse to stay close to that brute of a boss. Are the pay and benefits that good, or do you enjoy his company? It would surely be a good match, one who can't shut his mouth, and another who barely speaks three words a day."

Shang Qinghua looks around, a mix between a lost puppy and a scared fawn. "Lower your voice! You don't want him to hear!" He hushes Shen Yuan. "Is… is it really that obvious that we spend time together outside of work?"

Shen Yuan can only roll his eyes at the pathetic display. "It wasn't. But thanks for the clarification."

"Wait!" Shang Qinghua grips Shen Yuan's arm, betrayed by his own foolishness.

"I really do not know how you could be possessed to willingly spend time with such a man outside of work. You really must enjoy his manhandling."

"I don't!"

"Shut it. One with such little self-respect has no place to speak. You allow yourself to be disrespected and roughoused. You must be more forceful. Make him listen."

"Tsk. Is that what you think *you're* doing with Luo Binghe? That dude clearly has you wrapped around his little finger!"

"Shut it! Luo Binghe is caring and attentive. His outer rough exterior hides a depth of emotion and feeling that most would kill to have, let alone to be graced with such a coworker or partner. If you only perceive a cruel, conniving persona, then that is simply a reflection of your own daftness!" They're swaying back and forth, with Shen Yuan trying to wrangle his arm out of Shang Qinghua's grip, and Shang Qinghua refusing to let go.

"I knew it!" Shang Qinghua stands up, shock and satisfaction plastered on his face in equal parts, and his finger pointed at Shen Yuan. "Cucumber!!"

"Excuse me?!"

The rest of the office finally bothers to pay a lick of attention to their conversation. No one can resist the gossip of a phallic vegetable as it's yelled out so openly.

"Peerless Cucumber!!"

Shen Yuan grabs the man's tie and basically stuffs him in the storage closet, with its brand-new wooden door with a proper locking mechanism.

"How do you know that screen name."

"*PIDW*'s comment section! Heavens, you talk in real life just how you talk in the comments over there! Can't believe it took me so long to connect the dots of you talking about *real-life*

Luo Binghe with the same zeal you use for literary Luo Binghe! And you dare accuse *me* of confusing fiction with reality and being delusional!? You hypocrite!”

“Shut your mouth!” Shen Yuan feels his heart beating out of his chest. This is the effect that wretched light novel has on him, isn’t it? After one abnormally long breath, he speaks with his usual sneer. “And who might you be, then? Another degenerate like me, to go as far as to recognize someone else from the cadence and opinions in comments. And given your dogshit opinions… Enchanted Skeleton Boner?”

Shang Qinghua feels his blood pressure rising at being compared to one of his dumbest commenters, but he doesn’t correct the man. Better not enrage both Mobei-jun, who is standing behind Shen Yuan with an icy look, and Luo Binghe, as soon as he inevitably ends up hearing about this.

“Yeah, I’m him.” He gulps.

“Qinghua. Office. Now.”

Chapter 17: Convention

Chapter Summary

In which Luo Binghe and Shen Yuan have to go through customer service

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Randomly suggesting the perfect title to pick up for licensing and publishing has its perks. For one, 500k OP, in one fell swoop. The bad side is it instantly gives Shen Yuan a truckload of work, to be done in a crunch as the higher-ups got excited like monkeys on helium about those social media numbers and decided that the series had to go to print as soon as possible.

For weeks, Luo Binghe takes to pampering Shen Yuan: cleaning his apartment, making even more extravagant meals, giving him gifts (which do eat away at his OP savings, but they help offset the stress point increase), and giving him expert-level back massage at night (a skill that cost him 20k OP to master).

They haven't kissed since that night. The stress barely makes Shen Yuan in the mood to try anything. They cuddle and never speak about whatever the fuck is going on between them. Luo Binghe thinks he'll bring it up as soon as Shen Yuan sends the final file off to printing. But then, right after the message is sent, from upper levels comes a request to get *all three* books edited and ready to print, since they just *need* to make a special edition box set for the *"most anticipated series'"* debut. With stupid, useless gadgets that people will only get because they're official merchandise, and would never want otherwise. At least that's what Shen Yuan says during his nightly grumbling sessions. Luo Binghe thinks they're necessary for the man's physical health, at this point. He couldn't turn them off even if he wanted to.

A month later, the wait is over. Luo Binghe thinks that now, finally, could be the time. He doesn't want to think about just how much he needs Shen Yuan to confirm what he's thought for months. To put a word to what they're doing. To finally get his whole focus back on him and not on the damn ceiling as he stares into nothingness to recharge after a day's work.

As soon as Shen Yuan presses "send" on the final drafts, Luo Binghe is right behind him (after having sent the rest of the team away by placing a conspicuously large box of fresh donuts in the break room), with a small mooncake filled with sweet lotus paste.

"Senior, great job." Luo Binghe whispers, not wanting to attract the attention of those swarming the break room. He hears a ping but decides to ignore it. "Since we've never dined out, I've called ahead to book that nice restaurant, the one in the high-rise building that you've wanted to go to for months but always said you'd never had the funds for. Did you know that Mobei-jun constantly goes there with both your little friend and his business

partners? He pulled some strings to get us a last-minute reservation for that little private booth that overlooks the city and the mountains. I don't know what he did, since that table is always booked months in advance, and I honestly do not much care if he murdered someone for it, as long as it's not traced back to us. Plus, I don't even know if the cooking there will be as good as my usual stuff that you're used to. Since I cater it to your picky taste and all."

Why the fuck am I rambling? Why the fuck isn't he responding?

"Senior? Do you not wish to go to the restaurant with me?"

[Shen Yuan's stress levels increased by 1000 points.]

"I cannot fucking believe them." Shen Yuan whispers.

Only then, does Luo Binghe look at the screen.

"!We have the pleasure to inform you that you have been selected for a special moment in Zhanwei Fu Publishing Company history!!"

"If you are reading this message, you've been selected to participate in our very first booth at BIBF. Please see the following list for your duties."

"Mobei Jun: Project Manager."

"Shang Qinghua: assistant to Project Manager."

"Shen Yuan: set-up and customer service at the booth during all convention days."

"Luo Binghe: set up and customer service at the booth during all convention days."

"Ai Qin: social media posts."

"Even though the convention is two weeks away, those tasked with setting up will have to coordinate with our finance department and with the convention itself to get the necessary material to physically construct the booth. Please note that dismantling will be done by the convention itself, and those tasked with setup will only need to pack everything in cardboard boxes after the last day of the convention, and no later than 1 AM."

"What?!"

Yelling at Mobei-jun does not yield any results. A week later, as the convention begins, their perfectly balanced routine gets thrown on its head.

DAY 0

Set-up day doesn't seem too bad. Sure, it's tiring to get up at 5:30 AM, commute to the convention center next city over, look for parking, and resolve their problems with misprinted badges without violence. Mobei-jun and Shang Qinghua are already there, looking over the deliveries and taking stock of inventory, whereas Luo Binghe and Shen Yuan are tasked with

building the booth itself, displaying inventory, and managing the rest underneath the desk. Luo Binghe obviously takes up most of the physical labor for Shen Yuan, to spare the man's weak knees. He doesn't mention that his early morning exercises have not yielded results quite yet, and he's only marginally in better shape than the other man.

It's 9 PM by the time they get back home (Luo Binghe just now realizes that he's begun thinking of Shen Yuan's place as *home*, but it's best not to dwell too much on that). He whips out a quick curry sauce and they go to bed, only slightly worn out. It seems that, perhaps, they overestimated the amount of labor and effort required for a convention. Their first day, which logically would seem to be the hardest (with bolting stuff, nailing it, lifting and organizing heavy books) went by smoothly, and their bodies are handling it. Then, it follows that the remaining days, in which they simply have to talk and sell books, would be nothing to fear. Logically. The problems start in the morning, before Luo Binghe has the time to open his eyes.

DAY 1

[Shen Yuan's health points decreased by 100.]

"Binghe… My back…"

Luo Binghe is sitting up on their bed in an instant. He places a rugged, blistered palm on the small of Shen Yuan's back, rubbing soothingly.

"Senior?" He coos. "Your back hurts? But you didn't lift anything yesterday, did you?"

Shen Yuan looks away, not wanting to be perceived even in the dark. "I… Well…" He grumbles. "I couldn't let you do all the lifting yourself. What kind of man would that make me?! I did some organizing while you were setting up our inventory underneath the desk."

"Senior!" He pinches the soft side of Shen Yuan's belly. "I do not believe for a second that you have proper lifting posture. Hiding your lifting from me only made it worse for you."

"Whatever. It'll probably be okay by tomorrow." Shen Yuan mumbles. As he sits up, an unholy groan leaves his lips, and he never once bends his back. He's stiff as a board.

"Tsk. Get dressed. I'll make a hot water pouch that you can put behind your back on the way over."

They grab four meat buns (breakfast), two meat gaibans (lunch), four sausage jianbing (snacks), and ten bottled waters for their expedition. Shen Yuan insists on staying awake in solidarity with Luo Binghe during the drive, but an adorable yawn, accompanied by a little tear, makes Luo Binghe vow that he won't speak to Shen Yuan, even if stays awake. Thus, Shen Yuan relents (as he always does), and Luo Binghe gets to see his cute sleeping face, mouth agape, and drool dripping on his pants. That precious expression that he never gets to see in the pitch darkness of Shen Yuan's room.

A myriad of problems then befalls them. And it reminds Luo Binghe of a certain day of trying to understand public transportation.

At 8 AM, they get to the convention center. A crowd is already gathering outside, and they have to navigate a crowd of people glaring at them, all while trying to flash their “STAFF - ZHANWEI FU COMPANY” badges.

Inside, every booth has been set up. The tarps are removed from the counters and everyone is in their spots, donning smiles to a handful of clients milling about.

“Why’re people already here? Are our watches behind? Is it actually 9 AM?” Shen Yuan whispers, half walking, half running to their booth.

Their booth neighbors answer. “V.I.P. pass holders get here at 8 AM so they have an hour to browse and get special editions before everybody else.”

Luo Binghe and Shen Yuan both utter a shocked “huh?!” before going to their booth. That explains the small line of three stereotypical nerds waiting in front of the tarp.

Trying to not get overheard, Shen Yuan whispers: “Where the fuck was that information?!”

The friendly neighbors do not care about keeping professional secrets from clients. They’ve all got this figured out, it seems. “On every pamphlet. And in the Information for Vendors file.”

Shen Yuan turns to Luo Binghe, enraged. “Did anybody send you an Information for Vendors file?!”

At Luo Binghe’s no, they both start cursing Shang Qinghua and his bloodline.

The nerds in line to be the first to get their hands on *“The story of a regular high-school kid who turned into the God of Death and his crush, the blood-sucking lich”* seem to not care about Shen Yuan’s and Luo Binghe’s attempts at apologies, instead loudly lamenting that “this is not how you treat V.I.P. customers” and “my first and last purchase from this company.” Luo Binghe throws in some extra bookmarks to stave off a bad review, silently lamenting how he doesn’t have the power to curse the men into making sure they choke on the first chicken bone they eat.

Next, the problem with simply choosing whoever without *any* thought about skills or interest to booth a convention arises: Shen Yuan has never worked a register. *Obviously,* neither has Luo Binghe. They barely manage to open the cash register and hand out the correct change to the first few guys in line, before someone wants to pay *by card*. Sure, they’ve *seen* people pay with their cards or phones in stores before, but they’ve never been on the receiving end of it.

“If it's something that vendors do every day in three seconds, why does it look so confusing from this side? Why are there so many buttons?” Shen Yuan mutters. Luo Binghe tries pressing randomly on the register, but it only rewards him with a firm slap on the hand.

“System. How many points to fully unlock the cashier skill tree?”

[Skill Point package: spend 1500 OP to unlock cash-register handling ability at level 3?]

“Tch.”

Deciding to make the man who orchestrated this whole thing suffer, he hides behind the booth and calls Mobei-jun, who’s supposed to be walking around the convention and “networking”, whatever the fuck that means.

The phone rings. Once, then twice. Mobei-jun picks up on the third ring but doesn’t even say anything.

“I need points. One thousand and five hundred.”

A grunt comes from the other side.

[1500 OP received from Mobei-jun.]

[Skill tree unlocked!]

“Sent.” The word comes out with a *grunt*. A grunt that resonates off the walls of a small room.

Another voice comes from the other side of the phone. “Wh- are you taking a *call* while *fucking me?!”*

[Send a note as thanks?]

That bastard’s fucking Qinghua?! No, don’t send a fucking note while he’s fucking someone on the phone!

[Note sent: That bastard is fucking Qinghua.]

No!

The call ends abruptly.

Thankfully, with Luo Binghe manning the cash register, things appear to go more smoothly. Shen Yuan looks at him with gratitude in his eyes, and Luo Binghe practically purrs. If he had a tail, he’d for sure be wagging it right now.

It only takes fifteen minutes for them to realize the error in their ways. While Luo Binghe mans the cash register, Shen Yuan is in charge of talking to customers. Rather, he’s in charge of standing there, pale as a ghost, acting like a talisman to ward off intruders. He barely manages to get three words out of his mouth with female customers, and glares at male customers while talking to them. “That’s just my face” is his favorite excuse. Luo Binghe knows damn well that’s not just his face.

In the downtime, Luo Binghe manages to teach Shen Yuan the basics of a cash register. Shen Yuan doubts for one, single second, the notion that Luo Binghe was raised in a cult, but then quickly dismisses the thought, joyously singing Luo Binghe’s praises. He’s much happier behind the register, only speaking through numbers and vague gestures.

The switch is also a much better fit for Binghe, who effortlessly charms customers. Why convince them to buy only *one* box set of slop, when they could get *two* and have a gift ready for the next holiday season? Shen Yuan would never stoop so low. He's got standards with recommendations, and can't seem to lie even when Luo Binghe tells him that his job, while selling at a convention, is exactly that. Lying.

At midday, Shen Yuan's feet start killing him. Every ten or so minutes, the System blares a -1 HP warning, and Luo Binghe knows the problem will only get exponentially worse. To keep himself from going insane, he starts a little counter in the System's UI (Shen Yuan simply assumes that he's using a particularly strong memory). They take turns betting on which one will win.

[Counter started: "Where's the bathroom?"]

[Counter started: "Where's X booth?"]

At the end of the day, as Shen Yuan and Luo Binghe are putting the tarp back up for the night, Mobei-jun deigns to make an appearance. The earlier phone call seems to not faze him at all, contrary to his secretary, who is trembling and shivering, hiding behind his shoulders.

"Give me the bookkeeping." The small man stutters.

Luo Binghe tilts his head. "The what?"

"Bookkeeping. Stats on the scanner. It takes them automatically, you just need to give it to me for a moment."

"The scanner?" Shen Yuan and Luo Binghe ask simultaneously.

"Mh."

"Which scanner?"

"Box with register and receipt paper."

"There was no scanner in that box." Says Luo Binghe, while Shen Yuan fishes a scanner out of that same box. In their defense, it *was* hidden beneath a pile of receipt paper. In the end, they have to stay an extra hour to guesstimate just how many books they sold without scanning them.

Finally in the car, Shen Yuan immediately kicks off his shoes with a whine. His eyes close, and Luo Binghe thinks he's already gone to sleep until he mumbles.

"Who won?"

"Huh?"

"The contest. Bathroom. Booth."

"Oh." Luo Binghe chuckles. That man and his competitiveness.

[User's wager: "Where's the bathroom?" counter: 12]

[A-Yuan's wager: "Where's X booth?" counter: 15]

[Shen Yuan wins!]

"You. By three."

"See? Told you no one gives a shit about reading maps or how rude it is to ask for information without buying anything. Food's on you tomorrow."

As if Luo Binghe hasn't been treating Shen Yuan to food this whole time. Not that he has the time to retort back, because the other man's decided to simply avoid the conversation by immediately falling asleep.

When they get back home, they realize their tremendous mistake (they've literally not managed to get one thing right in this whole ordeal, it's truly baffling): they thought they'd have the time and energy to make dinner. What a foolish endeavor. They eat frozen treats from Shen Yuan's fridge while sitting on the floor, not bothering to even open the cabinet to throw the wrappers in the trash. It reminds Luo Binghe of a harder time. Turns it into something softer.

DAY 2

By the second day, Shen Yuan's feet start hurting at just 10 AM.

"Can you believe that I sent a message to the higher-ups on WeChat asking why there were no chairs in our equipment, and they said," Shen Yuan clears his throat for a perfect imitation, *"studies show that customers are instinctively put off by vendors who sit, finding them lazy, and associating bad qualities with the business and/or products."* He grunts. "Can you fucking believe that? I barely understand saying that to people who work eight-hour shifts, but to people who are working close to thirteen hours every day, no breaks, no days off, for four days straight? They're insane. I wish I could burn off their soles with my thoughts."

Luo Binghe chuckles. He remembers similar punishments coming from the mouth of someone who resembles his Shen Yuan. "I do believe that. There's pigs everywhere who forgot, or never knew, suffering." He leans closer. "I'll give you a massage tonight, how's that?"

"Hmph. Adequate."

They keep up their assigned roles for the day: Shen Yuan at the register, Luo Binghe enticing clients. He's even got this whole little speech about the book prepared, which he is quite proud of: "*The story of a regular high-school kid who turned into the God of Death and his crush, the blood-sucking lich* is a top-rated light novel with over a million readers, which combines action, romance, and deep self-reflection. It is a modern hero's journey, drawing on both classic wuxia fantasy and modern videogame culture, perfect for both teens and adults. On the cover, you can see our main character, who starts off as a regular wide-eyed high-

school kid just like all of us, and ends up embarking on a journey through loss and struggle that challenges his morality in unexpected ways. Ah, and don't forget that for our very first convention, we have an exclusive promotion! If you buy the box set, you actually end up paying for just two books, not three! And if you get two box sets, we'll give you, free of charge, one of the other titles from our publishing company, until stock lasts!"

It works on most people. With others, he's quick to go off-script if he notices their attention wavering. But as he repeats it, time starts blurring. The words lose meaning. His tongue and his body feel entirely alien to him, as if he's watching someone else say those words, over and over again.

That's when he feels a tap on his shoulder. Consciousness yanked back into his body, he turns to Shen Yuan. The customer runs away at the opening.

"Mh? Senior, I was talking to a customer."

"Take a break. Go to the bathroom. Get a meat bun from the bag."

"Why?"

"You said, and I quote: *The story of the blood-sucking lich* starts off as a regular wide-eyed box set, ends up embarking on a journey through loss and a regular high-school kid." Luo Binghe flushes at his raised eyebrow. "I could go on."

"Got it. I'll take a break."

He does and ditches the script as soon as he returns. He *knows* he's good at reading and charming people, and he can do that for twelve hours a day if that's what this world asks of him. It's not the struggle in the Abyss. *So why does it feel worse?*

The first woman who comes over after his break is the perfect way to redeem himself in Shen Yuan's eyes. They talk about the convention, about sales, and only *after* that go into talking about the book itself. The woman asks about literary references (Shen Yuan snorts from behind the register), about the target demographic, and about the main plot points. She talks a big game about buying four box sets for each of her nephews and getting two free extra books from the rest of their catalogue. Which is how she segways into asking about *all* the plots of the other books. Shen Yuan has to chime in to help with the older ones, and Luo Binghe, charmed by the smell of money, can barely see the way he's glaring at him.

It's rush time, with a line of clients, and Luo Binghe knows he should go help Shen Yuan at the register, bagging the box sets and handing them to customers since the poor man still cannot bend forward. But then she asks about *those books'* target demographics, and Luo Binghe is charmingly guesstimating, when…

[Shen Yuan's romance points decreased by 10.]

"Huh?"

The confusion must show on his face, and the woman takes the moment to strike: “Thank you *so* much for the information. I’ll make sure to call the boys’ mothers and get back to you once they approve. Thanks!”

Before Luo Binghe can call her a conniving, time-wasting bitch, she’s already out of sight. He wishes he could pull out Pen Mo and throw it perfectly at the back of her head, but there’s unfortunately too many witnesses. One of them being Shen Yuan. The man is *glaring.* Luo Binghe suddenly recalls only one other instance of romance point deduction: when Shang Qinghua and Shen Yuan walked in on him and Mobei-jun arguing. What the hell is the correlation between those two? Surely… surely…

He’s jealous?!

[Answer: Yes.]

Luo Binghe had never been one to care about jealousy and other such petty squabbles, so why does the way Shen Yuan stares ahead, refusing to meet his gaze, feel so crushing? Yet, for some forsaken reason, it also feels invigorating!

They make up when, at the very first instant where there are no eyes on them from customers or vendors, Luo Binghe sneaks up behind Shen Yuan and pokes him in the side.

“A-Yuan should take an early and extra-long lunch break. Sit in the cafeteria and rest your feet.”

Shen Yuan immediately forgets about his annoyance at the mention of resting his feet. It’s a blessing in disguise, since the promised massage from earlier in the morning is forgotten as well when they return home, as they both pass out in bed, still fully clothed.

DAY 3

By the third day, the effects of the confusing new environment start to wear off, and what’s left is a sort of unbearable boredom that neither of them can shake off.

Luo Binghe’s the first to get his fill of entertainment, when, as he’s at the register for a change, a crowd of small, elementary-school kids, comes trotting towards their booth.

Luo Binghe knows the book is suitable for teens and up.

Shen Yuan knows the book is suitable for teens and up.

Elementary school children see a “cool” high-school guy with a sword and a pair of gaming headphones, and they need to know *all* about it.

“Senior, what are his powers?”

Shen Yuan, whose brain only zeroes in on the power of seeing through clothes that the protagonist learns later on in the series, stammers a “Uh… he’s… darkness…”

“Darkness? Boring!” Chimes another girl. “Is there romance in this?”

“I… uh… yes!”

“Can I buy it?”

“I think it… it would be…” Shen Yuan desperately looks around for the children’s teacher, who is, of course, nowhere to be found. “Better… better suited for your older brother.”

“Senior—” a boy’s grubby hands have found their way around a book, destroyed the shrink wrap, and have it wide open on an illustration of the lich love interest, “Why are the ghost’s boobs so big?”

Shen Yuan almost chokes on his tongue. He glares at Luo Binghe, who clearly noticed the boy’s actions and stood by, watching without even thinking of stepping in. The fucker’s *smirking*.

“I… she’s…”

“It’s a she? Ghosts can be girls?”

“Yes! Ghosts can be—”

“Does that mean my mom is a ghost?” another kid chimes. “She died two years ago.”

Shen Yuan is already praying in five different languages for a lightning bolt from the sky to hit him right this second and kill him instantly when a squad of three anxious teachers finally arrives, smacks the book out of the boy’s hands, and ushers the class away.

Only then does Shen Yuan turn towards the traitor, glaring. And yet, his eyes flicker to Luo Binghe’s cute little evil smirk. The way he’s just eating him up with those eyes, watching his every move, even taking sick pleasure from his discomfort.

“Help would have been appreciated.”

Luo Binghe laughs. “I was enjoying how *senior”* he mocks, imitating a child’s voice, “was handling a high-stress environment. Looked like they were about to eat you alive.”

“Shameless!”

DAY 4

The last day is a blur. They don’t even have eight hours of sleep covering three days, and Luo Binghe barely registers talking to customers, or even selling most of the books. He’s only keenly aware of his feet. They’ve started hurting. Never once, in this life or the previous one, have his *feet* hurt. It’s a nightmare. Like thousands of needles digging into his soles. He could swear that he’s spent more time standing up, moving about, and doing stuff, than this. He’s quite sure he once, not even a year ago, spent an entire week fighting without a moment’s rest in the Abyss.

Suddenly, the pain in his feet feels like the price of privilege. A tag signaling that if his mind cannot focus on other, more important tasks than it’ll torture him with the bottom of the

barrel: foot pain. Which, of course, he can't let Shen Yuan see. He'd rather die than let him see how much pain he's in from the new sensation.

At the end of the day, somehow, they've sold most of the stock. It takes them only about thirty minutes to package everything up, lock the register, and get ready to leave. As soon as they're done, putting their jackets on, brains barely working, another vendor comes up to them. She's smiling. How the hell is she smiling?

"Hi, guys! We're doing an after-party with other vendors on the younger side at the bar in front of exit E! You're welcome to join!"

"Are you fucking insane?" They ask in unison. The girl does not hear, as she's already turned her back to recruit others for her hellish plan.

They don't even have to say anything, silently agreeing to simply go home. That night, they *mostly* don't say anything. The drive back is silent as always, but Shen Yuan stays awake the whole time, even offering to drive for the first time *ever*. Luo Binghe can't be bothered with trying to understand his intentions or even asking the System. He turned off the UI half-way through the second day and never looked back since.

When they get home, Luo Binghe knows that Shen Yuan's stress and health levels must both be declining exponentially. Ignoring the pain in his own two feet, ignoring the gravitational pull of the bed, he gets his ass in the kitchen, silently and without telling Shen Yuan, who would surely refuse. He smacks his cheeks a few times, digs the point of Pen Mo in his palm to wake himself up, and then gets to work on some hand-pulled noodles. Sure, he *could* leave such strenuous preparations for tomorrow. But he feels like celebrating *now*. Feels like going up to an exhausted Shen Yuan with a steaming plate of his favorite *right now*.

In his delirium, he doesn't realize how much time is passing. It's only when Shen Yuan peeks his head into the kitchen, carrying a sickening smell of florals, that Luo Binghe looks up at the wall.

"What the fuck are you doing, Binghe?" Shen Yuan's words are slurred. Luo Binghe can somehow understand them.

"Noodles. Dinner."

"Come to the bedroom. Finish later."

"No. Senior, if I go to the bedroom now, I'm not getting out until tomorrow morning."

"I…" Shen Yuan grumbles. "I made…"

Blushing, Shen Yuan refuses to finish his sentence and just retreats to their bedroom. Luo Binghe can't help but follow him.

Inside, is a simple clear plastic container, next to the bed. It's filled to the brim with steaming water, inside which salts and different flowers have been placed. Quite carelessly, if Luo Binghe is to judge by the smell.

“What is that?”

“Foot bath.”

“Then why are you not in it, senior?”

“It’s for you. Not for me.”

“Huh?!” Luo Binghe freezes. “My feet—”

“You think I couldn’t notice you switching your weight back and forth on your feet like a damn flamingo all day? I know your feet hurt. Don’t insult my intelligence. Sit.”

Luo Binghe feels something blooming in his chest. It feels like something that was buried underneath layers of panic, during a certain incident in a storage closet.

“But, the noodles—”

“Who gives a shit, Binghe. You’re not gonna have your way with me on this one. Sit. For thirty minutes at least. I’m using a timer.”

The blooming feeling in his chest suddenly bursts, unable to be contained. It blooms like the brightest, rarest flower in spring, bursting forward, rising from his chest and out of his mouth.

“Shen Yuan. I love you.” He whispers. His pitch is slightly higher than normal. “And I’m your Luo Binghe from the shitty light novel Proud Immortal Demon Way.”

[Scenario unlocked: confession]

Wait.

Huh?

Panic soon replaces the blooming feeling.

Chapter End Notes

Writing this chapter was a blast. I put all my experiences of working at cons into it, and tried making them fun. I hope you enjoyed it :)

Stay tuned for the last few chapters, coming by the end of the week at the latest! A reminder that chapter 18 will be the end of the luo binghe/shen yuan storyline, whereas chapter 19 will be an epilogue that follows Shen Jiu and Yue Qingyuan in a PIDW that has been abandoned by its author!

Chapter 18: Purpose

Chapter Summary

In which we reach the end of Luo Binghe and Shen Yuan's story

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

How was I able to say those words?! I'm nowhere near a million OP!

He shrinks back, closing his eyes and bracing for the punishment module.

Yet, no warnings arrive. He's in control of his senses and his body. Even with his eyes closed, he can feel the usual humidity of Shen Yuan's room, and the smell of the boiling sauce from the kitchen.

"What…?" Shen Yuan's voice is weak and trembling. "Binghe, what the fuck are you talking about? If you think this is something to tease me about…"

Luo Binghe has never heard Shen Yuan so genuinely hurt and heartbroken. It makes him feel like the lowest scum of the earth. Luo Binghe opens his eyes and can see genuine sorrow in Shen Yuan's.

"Senior— I—" He draws closer, then drops to his knees, clutching to Shen Yuan like a child begging for sweets. "I am not teasing you. I am Luo Binghe. That same Luo Binghe you read about. I was abandoned, then mistreated by my shizun, and then betrayed by him and dropped into the Abyss, where I fought my way out. That's what you were reading, right? In the last chapter, I was about to crawl out of there—"

Shen Yuan tries to ignore how adorable the man looks right now. Especially since he's so very clearly pulling his leg. And making his eyes wet on purpose because he knows it works on him. "So you took an interest in something I liked and are now trying to *impersonate* the main character? For what?!"

Luo Binghe is half-tempted to turn the UI back on. But he doesn't. Something in him feels like the System would just fuck up this moment for him.

"A-Yuan. I am being sincere. What happened later, was that I scaled the Abyss, tripped, and fell to my death."

"Nonsense! Proud Immortal Demon Way Luo Binghe wouldn't trip to his death!"

"*I know!* Then everything turned to black, and I woke up in this body, at the exact moment when I was being introduced to this company!" He considers, for a moment, revealing the truth about the System and his purpose. He decides against it. "You... you have to believe me. I know no one else would, but you, *you*..."

"That's…" Shen Yuan falters. His hand reaches out to pat the top of Luo Binghe's head. "You have to realize how preposterous that is. We're both tired. Had only a handful of hours of sleep. Maybe you're delusional… I wouldn't blame you, Binghe…"

"I'm not delusional." Luo Binghe pleads. "Senior, I was sent into this world, along with Mobei-xiansheng. He's the same Mobei-jun as those books!"

Shen Yuan freezes. *That… that's a little more than a coincidence. Two of them, with the same exact name, show up out of the blue in the office of a failing publishing company, neither with any apparent clue about modern society at first, with Luo Binghe talking about dual cultivation and other shit like that… Holy shit. Holy shit…*

"You—"

Luo Binghe takes the jade keychain and holds it up to Shen Yuan, almost in prayer. "I do not know what *Little Mushroom* is! That night, I saw this, and it— it looked so much like my jade Guanyin. *My jade Guanyin*. I don't know where the real one is, or if it really exists, but that's why I was so enamored by this! Why I've kept it close for so long! You know— you know I didn't even know about Proud Immortal Demon Way at that time!"

That seals the deal. Shen Yuan falls to his knees in front of him. "YOU'RE LUO BINGHE?!"

"I am, A-Yuan!! I am!!" Luo Binghe exclaims, his voice a high-pitched squeal.

"What the fuck are you doing in a random publishing Company in modern China?! You should be out cultivating, building a harem, fighting! Being in nature!!"

Huh?!

"A-Yuan, *that's* what bothers you?" Luo Binghe can't help but laugh. As his face contorts, he feels a wetness on his cheeks. "Life in the office *is* horrible and ugly… but… it has its purpose. And what did you say about a harem?"

Shen Yuan goes red. "Forget it. You— wait. That. you said something before saying you're Luo Binghe from PIDW. You— You—"

Luo Binghe lets his body go completely limp into Shen Yuan's. "I love you, A-Yuan. In my previous life, no one was ever my equal. The concept of love would have been preposterous. But I know… when I saw that little witch's brew you made in the foot bath, the words just came out."

"You… shamelessly smooth as always…" Shen Yuan grumbles. Just barely thinking about the fact that maybe, this protagonist's beginner-level harem might learn to transmigrate just

to kill and torture him for stealing him from them. Mostly just feeling a lot of shit he's never felt before. That he was quite sure he'd never get to feel.

"Won't you say it back, A-Yuan?"

"I'm still your senior, don't call me A-Yuan!" Shen Yuan lightly smacks his head, but Luo Binghe still catches the way his eyes are wide, the way his fingers tremble, the way his lips are pursed in a pout, emotional. "I— I don't—"

"It's okay if senior needs some time. Not too much, though, or I'll stop feeding him." Luo Binghe leans up, just slightly. He makes Shen Yuan bend down, in order for their lips to meet for their second kiss.

Luo Binghe only turns the UI back on the following morning. Going through the history of alerts he missed, sits.

[Shen Yuan status updated: love.]

[High-level reward issued: one million OP.]

Tch. So he's just too shy to say it. Bastard.

Their move to the countryside comes earlier than he would have expected. All it takes is one message on WeChat from Shen Yuan to Mobei-jun, without even asking for Luo Binghe's permission.

"You need to be in nature. In a pretty place. Not this hell." That's the only explanation he gives. Luo Binghe's heart squeezes painfully at the thought of Shen Yuan somehow being fine with this *hell* for himself but not for Luo Binghe.

Mobei-jun swiftly opens a subsidiary with just two employees in a small countryside town, giving them license to work remotely as a random abandoned shack is being renovated into their office. They literally buy a house on the phone, from an ecstatic vendor talking about how it's so nice that "young people are finally going back to their roots in the countryside, and bringing business along!"

The stuff from both their apartments fits into half of the truck they rented. Shen Yuan drives, suddenly very retroactively anxious about the fact that he let someone who didn't even know about cars drive him for so long. Luo Binghe curls up on his seat, feet on the dashboard, flipping through the pages of some of Shen Yuan's "21st century must-reads". He starts with "LOVE BULLET" (because Shen Yuan said, quote "you have to learn what love is fucking like". Luo Binghe decides to wait until he says it back to tease him about the fact that maybe *he* should read that as well). Shen Yuan panics about the road, after not driving for so long. They switch after two hours.

Their new home is more than double the size of their previous apartments combined. It's surrounded by a nice garden and has a gorgeous view of the cluster of houses that make up the village, sprawling over the hillside. They even have a shed, which Shen Yuan makes sure

to tear down the second day, followed by Luo Binghe scolding him and taking out the myriad of splinters left in the man's palms.

They work in their spacious living room, sprawled on the floor and not caring about posture. Luo Binghe often just curls up on Shen Yuan's lap and works on his phone, demanding to be pet like a cat. Shen Yuan complies. As he runs his palm over Luo Binghe's stomach, he's tempted to just dip his head down, feel his warmth, his healthy heartbeat. This man below him, who suddenly looks *so damn young*, has experienced horrors and torture that, in some twisted way, Shen Yuan is glad to know about. Knowing all about Luo Binghe's trauma feels like a responsibility he'd sign on for every day, again and again. Because somehow, in his lifetime, a shitty stallion novel's protagonist got transported into his world, and Shen Yuan was lucky enough to catch him in his fall. Sure, modern-day China may not have cultivation and peerless beauties, but it's *safe*. Away from duels, injuries, revenge and, most importantly, nonsensical plot points. It's not much that Shen Yuan can give a person like him. But every day, he vows to give it.

Shen Yuan's health finally gets into the final stretch of the HP bar, from both the clean air, the more regular exercise (Luo Binghe plants a garden, and Shen Yuan is determined to pull his weight), and the better ingredients in meals, although they *do* miss certain greasy meat buns.

Shen Yuan's stress levels also drop. He attributes it to the quiet silence of the countryside, but Luo Binghe doesn't miss the "stress decreased" alerts whenever they fuck, making their way through a thousand positions in each spot of the house (and the garden).

At one point, the System alerts Luo Binghe that his main mission has been achieved. Shen Yuan is healthy, and his stress is manageable. Another million overtime points are deposited in his account. He *should* be looking for a way back into his world. Yet the thought doesn't even cross his mind. Why go back to a place where every dream would be plagued with Shen Qingqiu's sneer, when he's got Shen Yuan right here, to provide for all his needs? Not to mention the weird mindfuck (one of his top-ten modern world words) implications of going back into a world where Shang Qinghua controls him and his actions.

They're lounging on the living room floor, windows and doors wide open, Shen Yuan taking a nap on Luo Binghe's bicep (he's also started working out again, following some of the principles of cultivation, which are yet to yield any results). He's watching cat videos on his phone, as Shen Yuan told him they're "staples of modern times", when Mobei-jun and Shang Qinghua enter the house. Luo Binghe glares at them. Especially at Shang Qinghua. His desire to beat the man an inch to his death has never really subsided, but Mobei-jun has kept him away from his secretary. So, alas, he hasn't even gotten to speak to the man after the big revelation. Even now, he's standing behind the twitching mess of a man, ready to spring into action at a moment's notice. Perhaps Luo Binghe will use some of his hard-earned points to learn what the fuck is going on between the two of them.

Mobei-jun and Shang Qinghua were expected much later, three hours to be exact. Luo Binghe immediately presses a finger on his lips and types a message on his phone for Mobei-jun and Shang Qinghua to read: "Do not make any noise. He wakes up, I kill you both. There are hand-pulled noodles in the kitchen. Help yourselves."

Both men comply, but it seems that they can't help but bicker after just thirty seconds. Shang Qinhua's voice, whining about wanting Mobei-jun to make fresh noodles for him as well, carries to the living room. Shen Yuan stirs, eyes open in a sleepy haze.

"A-Luo? Are they here?"

"Shh, shh, A-Yuan. Go back to sleep." He whispers, making sure to not move a single muscle, so as to not break Shen Yuan's sleepiness.

The man smiles softly and curls back up into him. Not even three seconds later, he's asleep once more. As he runs his hand over Shen Yuan's hair, he's tempted to push his head closer, and closer and closer, until Shen Yuan becomes part of him, and can never leave even if he wanted to. Until their hands fuse together and can never be pried apart, until Shen Yuan's head locks in place and can only ever look at Luo Binghe. And yet he simply stays put, allowing the man to rest and maintain his bodily autonomy. He looks at that lovely rise and fall of his chest, that he's spent months protecting.

Mom… this man is the person who is best to me in this world.

He can never go back to her. To those kind but hard days. He can almost imagine it, though, Shen Yuan transported to *his* world, dragged to meet his mom, somehow alive, somehow older, her back curved but her eyes never once losing their spark. Oh, she would have hated him. But then Luo Binghe would have shown her his new little jade Guanyin. He would have exaggerated the trouble Shen Yuan went through to get it. Maybe turned it into a series of grueling battles or something. Perhaps then, she could have warmed up to him.

Instead of those silly fantasies, what he *can* do is place his palm over Shen Yuan's heart. He checks that it's running hot and steady. He vows to always protect that heartbeat, every single day of this strange life he's been gifted.

[Purpose achieved.]

[Reward issued: one gazillion OP!]

Chapter End Notes

It's such a bittersweet feeling to close up the story of Luo Binghe and Shen Yuan. I worked so hard on this fic and even though I know it could be better, I'm happy at the place it's at right now. I'd never written anything this huge before (my previous longest fic it at about 5k words!) so I'm just proud of myself.

If you made it this far, thank you, from the bottom of my heart. It means the world to me that you stuck around something I poured so many hours in, even when it was extremely stressful. This fic was a joy to write and it will always have such a precious place in my heart for being my first Big Baby.

If you enjoyed this, I hope the next chapter (Shen Jiu/Yue Qingyuan) will be a little extra treat for you. But if that ship doesn't float your boat, then that's totally fine! I'm glad to have had you along for the ride <3

Chapter 19: Epilogue

Chapter Summary

In which we take a peek into PIDW, but without Shang Qinghua at the reins.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In another world, no longer bound by Shang Qinghua's sadist designs, Shen Qingqiu relaxes in his Peak's hot springs, under the pale moonlight.

He does not know the reason, and that angers him greatly, but his mind has been clearer lately. Since Luo Binghe's body was found, a year or so ago, he's slowly gotten soft. He doesn't feel nearly as much satisfaction when he punishes his students. He doesn't care about pestering them, or getting closer to them. When looking to the past, he doesn't feel as much hatred anymore. Nowhere near as much resentment. Even looking at that man has been bearable for a while. He *observed* him in the last meeting. Worried, for a second, that he'd actually see the tall, strong man in front of him. Not a child that made promises he couldn't keep. Preposterous.

He debated going into seclusion for a while, to see if it would fix him. And he's kept postponing the decision. He tries to pretend to himself that he doesn't know why. For now, he stares at the stars, the sloshing of water in his ears his only companion.

That is, until he hears footsteps behind him. And he doesn't need to turn around to recognize who they belong to.

"Qingyuan, although martial brothers need to learn to share, we're adults. I'd appreciate it if you chose one of the many other available pools for your nightly soak."

Yue Qingyuan doesn't respond. The rustling of clothing can be heard, and Xuan Su is set on the ground.

"So you do not intend to respect my wishes." Shen Qingqiu growls, refusing to turn around, but grabbing Xiu Ya's handle, since he isn't dumb enough to leave it unattended on a pile of clothes.

"Let me stay by your side in this bath. I will not utter a word if that is not what you wish of me, Xiao-Jiu."

"Tsk. At least you know that you gave up the right to speak to me long ago."

"I did. But let me regain it. Please." The pleading whisper flies straight to Shen Qingqiu's ear.

“No.”

Yue Qingyuan finally sets foot in the water. The ripples immediately reach Shen Qingqiu, and a shiver runs down his spine. He turns around, enraged at the man. Stares right into his eyes, without thinking much of it.

“You’re still in your clothes! You’ll make the hot springs dirty! Get out and remove your robes at once!”

“I apologize, Xiao-Jiu. For making you dirty.” He takes a step closer. “I will make you clean again. If you let me.”

Shen Yuan raises his sword, pointing it directly at Yue Qingyuan’s forehead. He even throws some leaf blades. Yue Qingyuan, in his audacity, simply stands there, with an unwavering gaze that never leaves Shen Qingqiu’s eyes. The leaves graze his skin, leaving small red marks all over his arms and torso, but none on his face.

“There is no making me clean. There is no going back to the past. I am not your Shen Jiu.”

For a moment, Yue Qingyuan seems as if he was struck by the name itself. He winces, almost imperceptibly, but then his gaze steels once more into fierce, quiet determination.

“If Gods block, I’ll kill the Gods; if Buddhas block, I’ll kill the Buddhas—”

“Stop this nonsense!”

“So if Shen Qingqiu asks me to cast Shen Jiu from my mind, then I will. I will only look at the man in front of him, and never again weigh him down with the shadow of a past long gone. If he would let me. If he, in his kindness, would let me.” He whispers, standing still in the water.

Shen Qingqiu half expects him to come closer.

But he doesn’t.

He simply stands there, waiting for an answer.

Shen Qingqiu knows those words, the words Yue Qingyuan wants, cannot possibly come out of his mouth. Not yet. In time, perhaps. So he just wishes Yue Qingyuan would *move*, and free him from his turmoil.

But he doesn’t.

He stays still, eyes infinite pools of compassion, directed only to him. Ever, only to him.

Shen Qingqiu looks at him. His eyes run and run like hares on snow, running from a predator but never finding any shelter in a sprawl of white. The same way, he can’t stop looking at the man in front of him. He can’t tear his eyes away, and he knows he’s being watched.

Unable to run, unable to do *anything at all*, he drops Xiu Ya in the water and leaps on him, pressing their lips together with a pained whimper that he tries to suppress with a growl.

Yue Qingyuan doesn’t waste a single fraction of a second. His arms are around Shen Qingqiu in an instant, holding onto him desperately, like a drowning man.

Chapter End Notes

It's officially done! T_T
Thank you for tagging along for this ride. I just want to give a little shoutout again to the people that made this fic possible. To the staff of the SVSSS Big Bang that this fic was a part of, my beta reader eel (@spottedgardeneelstan on tumblr), and the artists horo (@horobinota on bluesky) and bingdelulu (@dehloosquared on twitter); please go check them out!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!